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For Those Who Grew Too Fast

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For Those Who Grew Too Fast

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for those
who grew
too fast

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we took what you told us to scratch out

and made it some

we loved.

will these walls
understand?

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I Believe in Me

Erik Soto-Vasquez

I believe that being a first-generation university student is a blessing.

When I look around at my other first-gen friends here at Loyola Marymount University (LMU) I feel empowered and I am blanketed in a sense of belonging around these wonderful people. However, I would have never imagined myself being here in this environment.

Education has always been an important part of my life. My parents were unable to continue their own education in Mexico because they had to work and support their families. They both dropped out in middle school. When I got to middle school, I had no idea what a university was. I had no idea what going to college meant and was introduced to this idea in high school. The more I heard about college, the more I thought about never being able to afford to attend a university, or even yet, be able to get into one.

Throughout my junior and senior year, everyone spoke and inquired about plans after high school and I felt ashamed for not having one. I came to realize how important a college degree is valued in this society and how badly I wanted to continue my education, but my parents didn't know how to help me and I didn't know the first step in applying to universities.

The day I found out I got accepted into LMU was the best day of my life; it was a dream I never knew I had that came true. I was so excited and proud of myself, but as I was

approaching my move-in date, those feelings were slowly being replaced by nervousness and self-doubt.

My first day on campus was one of the most nerve-wrecking days I have ever experienced. I arrived not knowing who I would meet. I believed everyone here was super rich and I was intimidated that no one looked like me. I was convinced that I would not fit in. However, this belief was quickly changed. I attended LMU's First To Go Summer Orientation. Everyone there was warm and welcoming. We were all bonded by one thing and that was being the first in our families to attend a university. Here I learned about being first-gen, a term that I did not know existed but that I now identify with and use to empower me every day.

Since learning about my first-generation identity, my outlook on life has changed. I am so happy that I have built this community that I can trust and be myself when I am away from home. This first-gen community feels like another home and it is truly a second family. Identifying as first-gen has made me more confident and has helped me find myself. I want to use this identity to help others in my community back home, such as my younger sister. She is in middle school right now and I hope I can teach her about being first-gen and inspire her to keep pursuing her education. I hope to continue to expand this community I have become a part of, and in turn, use it to keep spurring growth within myself.

I believe in me and in first-generation students.

Author Biography: Erik is a 19-year-old economics major from Santa Fe, New Mexico. In his free time, he loves to skateboard, play soccer, and paint.

Roommates

Leonardo Dominguez Ortega

I never assumed college would be easy, nor did I assume that the path toward commencement would be linear. Regardless of my mental preparation for the difficulties college would bring, I, for some reason, never thought about how difficult it would be to have a roommate. I've shared a room all my life, and I didn't think I would need to prepare to share my room with someone else. As a first-generation college student, my mom didn't have the experience to prepare me for the potential negative possibilities of sharing a college dorm room. There was no handbook to guide me through all the issues that came up between my roommate and me. I was one student in a body of 9,000. Who could help? My R.A. (Residential Advisor) surely didn't, and people I considered friends didn't seem to care about my situation. I had to think critically, put my big-boy pants on, and handle the situation myself.

I think, before I begin detailing the specifics of our conflicts, it is important to outline my roommate's character and mine. My roommate is a legacy student. Both of his parents went to our school in their adolescence and his father even holds a position on the Board of Regents. He has every resource he could ever need at school and, along with that, he's a white male in a white-majority institution. He is well-off and, as far as I know, has had very few struggles. There is a certain confidence that comes with having everything at your feet and not having to struggle to obtain what you want.

I, on the other hand, am the complete opposite. My mother finished high school in another country and my father has never been in the picture. I began college knowing no one and knowing nothing. My life has

consisted of struggling financially and mentally and dealing with racism. There are countless things I have wanted and could never get, and the things that I did get, I had to dig my heels into the ground and fight for them, college included. I entered my new school setting as a black sheep.

As the semester began, conflicts popped up quickly. My roommate didn't respect my property or space. He rubbed his beliefs in my face and never responded after being called out. I, being that I've shared a room my entire life, always respected his items and his space. I kept my beliefs to myself and would be open to correcting any faults he found crossed the line. This may come off as biased, and trust me, I contemplated this angle too. It sounded as though I was overreacting and being uptight. That's what he would tell me. It took me a while to accept that what I was feeling was valid and unacceptable. As so many first-generation college students, I had so much to deal with due to the college transition and these unnecessary issues were the last thing I needed. It took a lot to believe what I felt was valid and I know many first-gen students can relate to that, whether it be with imposter syndrome, anxiety, or roommate issues.

I felt as though I was a man trapped on an island whilst at school. I felt alone, lost, and constantly uncomfortable. I had moments of pettiness as retaliation, but it felt gross to do so. To stoop down to the level of someone that disrespects someone else or is inconsiderate felt so wrong and foreign. Being up front was the best option and demanding my rights be respected was the best thing to do. I felt immense gratification that I could brush my pride aside, veer away

from childish solutions, and do the mature thing: communicate.

Sadly, that did not work. It failed over and over and over again. I always give people the benefit of the doubt, and in the end, that led to me dealing with more than I should've in the first place. I didn't prioritize my feelings of comfort or my sense of security because I wanted to believe that people could change. The lack of respect for my space and my person became too much. I had to decide my next move. Deep down, I wanted to continue to live there just to give him trouble, to not let him think he won by having me give up and leave. That was my pride speaking. So, I decided to do what was best for me. I decided to pick my battles and concluded that this was not worth my time or my attention. As a first-gen student, I already had so much to deal with, something he could never understand. Also like so many first-gen students, I wasn't sure as to how to handle the situation. I was in unknown territory and felt so lost. I decided to push as hard as I could for a roommate swap and I was, thankfully, able to get it.

As so many first gen-students already know, we enter college with so little. Many of us may struggle financially, we may struggle with mental health, we may struggle finding our place, we may struggle to take care of ourselves, and we may struggle to do what's best for ourselves. Deciding to drop the entire situation despite wanting to fight for "respect" was the healthiest thing I could have done. I got a new roommate that respected my space and my property. Instead of having

to go through another semester trying to argue and be disrespected every other day, I had peace. Being first-gen, I had so many things in my way preventing me from making a healthy decision. I had very little help or support, it took a lot to recognize that my emotions were valid, and it took a lot to have the courage to tell myself that my comfort and my well-being mattered.

As a first-generation college student, I understand all the trials and tribulations that so many other first-gen students go through. It's so difficult to enter such a strange environment and be expected to acclimate so quickly and be successful through it all. It's easy to get lost along the way and the lack of resources we have at our institutions doesn't help. Despite how much this sets us back, in the end, it is what makes us so strong and what makes our rise so much more gratifying and rewarding. We learn about perseverance, self-care, and hard work unlike many others ever will. First-gen students are so strong and powerful. All it takes is recognizing that we hold the power to rise above it all. For me, my roommate situation was what taught me that in a world and in an environment where so much is out of my control, I can still control so much. It taught me to care for myself, to rise above, and to think critically. These skills are all so important, and as a first-gen college student, they changed the way I approach life in college and will continue to shape me beyond that. Being first-gen is about learning and growing and being first-gen will be forever.

Author Biography: Leonardo is Mexican 19-year-old that has grown up in Los Angeles for most of his life. He is a psychology major at LMU and hopes to earn his doctorate in psychology. Mental health in the Latinx community is a huge deal to him, and he hopes to use his doctorate to raise awareness of mental health within the Latinx community. His family is what is most important to him and he feels very strongly about the importance of an education.

Self-Love

Kiana Liu



This photograph is an edit I made to remind myself of my self-worth. It is easy to be your worst critique and constantly put yourself down, but what does it accomplish? In my Hawaiian culture it is not normal to brag about yourself which is why I never learned to

celebrate my triumphs. What I have come to realize is that you cannot only love yourself when life is great, but you must learn to love yourself when you mess up. This journey to self-love continues to be a work in progress and this photograph is a daily reminder for me.

Author Biography: Born on the island of Maui, Kiana has always enjoyed learning new things. She went through phases of what she thought she wanted to be when she grew up. At one point, she thought she wanted to be a geologist. High school made her appreciate the value of education, allowing her to explore her passions while remaining deeply rooted in both her Hawaiian and Filipino cultures. There she found her passion for photography and film because it was a way to show others how she saw the world in a creative form.

First to Rise

Veronica Gomez

Author's Note: I decided to write a short poem about my experience as a first-generation college student. As a first-generation college student, I have faced many obstacles that created an emotional rollercoaster throughout my life. Being first-generation has taught me many lessons.

I am here to be the First to Rise.

The one who struggled and wiped the tears through

Many challenges.

The one who rose above everyone else in high school just to get a higher education.

All the sacrifices that had to be done in order to succeed.

I was the first to achieve a higher education.

I was the first to leave home right after high school to get this type of education.

I am here to be the first to obtain my degree and become someone I want to be.

I have the power to control what I want to do.

I will not be forced to work a job I don't want to be in

For the rest of my life.

I will have many options

To do what I want to do

I am the first generation to go to college and to pursue my dreams

I am First to Go.

Author Biography: Veronica Catalina Gomez and was born and raised in Los Angeles, California. Her parents came to the United States leaving their entire lives behind in El Salvador. She and her family are extremely close, and they always look out for one another. She is the youngest of four daughters and the first in her family to pursue her higher education right after high school. She is a first-generation college student, and even though she has embraced this identity, she has faced many obstacles. And yet, she believes that those obstacles have shaped her values and beliefs. She has many supporters and role models in her life, but the person who matters the most is her mother who has always supported her.

To *mis hijos*

María Fernanda Meléndez Miranda

Author's Note: My piece is for children. I created my legacy so they could one day create their own. I came to LMU to start my future and have it set. I lived through challenges, sweat, and tears so that my kids would not have to. My letter is to prepare them for what is to come. There were things that I did not know before going to college and I want my kids to be prepared for the world and beyond.

To *mis hijos*:

When I'm writing this, I am a freshman in college into my spring semester. I want to tell you a couple things that I wish I knew when I was your age. *Yo no sabía nada, nada, nada.*

Tus abuelos no fueron a la universidad. I had to teach myself a lot of things. From college financial aid to applications. The only people that helped me were my friends and Google. This was a whole new world to me. I'm actually surprised I did it right and made it into college. *Tus abuelos* were even more confused than I was.

There was one thing *tus abuelos y mis abuelos* always told me, "*hay que écharle ganas.*" The same thing I always tell you. Life is not easy and it's going to get a whole lot harder. You're going to learn things every day and meet people along the way. There is one thing for sure, your dad and I are the only ones who are going to be with you until the very end. I don't know about your dad, but *mis padres* were there every single day. They called me every day while I was at LMU in Los Angeles. It was hard moving away from Hayward. Yes, the Bay Area was always my home, it's where I grew up but part of me always loved Los Angeles. It was a part of the reason I chose LMU. Wherever you decide to go, make sure it's the right place.

I worked hard and gave my sweat and tears so you would be able to go to college. My challenges were my motivation and everything I did was so that you could have the life I never had. I worked hard so *tus abuelos* wouldn't have to work a day in their life. I did everything for *tus abuelos y por ti*. You were my motivation before you even existed. That's why I wanted to write you this letter so you would be prepared for the world.

#1: College is more than just learning

I spent most of my freshman year doing homework, studying in the library, and drinking coffee. I never went out and it's one of the things that I regret the most. I wished I could go back in time and would have attended parties or gone out to theme parks with my friends, but I didn't. I thought college was more about getting a 4.0 GPA and all A's when it never is. Who is going to look at your grades when you graduate? NO ONE! No one is going to care if you got a C first semester. You are just starting out and it's ok to mess up. Go out! Go to the beach, the snow, whatever you want. It's your time to live your life. I lived mine, now it's your turn.

#2: Find out who your true friends are.

Ah! Friends. This is hard because you meet so many people in college. You will see new people that you have never seen before every single day. True friends will be the ones who push you to

become better. They are the ones that will tell you to actually do your homework and think about your career. I remember my two best friends. They were both named Jocelyn. I don't know what I would have done without these girls. You'll know, you'll feel it, when you want to keep these people in your life.

#3: College will go by so quickly.

To think that you were just born and now you're going to college. First year of college will go by even quicker than your senior year. Before you know it, we will be seeing you walk across the stage with your degree. It will be the happiest day of my life. I'll finally know I raised you right. You will want to do everything you want to do before you have a little one of your own running around.

#4: Prove people wrong.

You will get a lot of stares when you're in class. Don't even pay attention to it. Let them stare! You do what you're there to do. Who cares if people think you don't belong because of what you look like? Go above and beyond and those people will regret what they thought of you.

#5: Work on learning your money!

Being on your own comes with a whole bunch of responsibilities. One of them is *el dinero*. You're going to work and make bank, but you have to think of the future. What if something happens and you can't work? With some money saved, your set. Save a small piece from your paycheck, and I'm telling you now, it's going to add up. It'll be extremely useful in the future.

#5: Last by not least, LIVE YOUR LEGACY.

Make your mark in this world. You're going to be on this earth for years, so make it meaningful and worth it. I'm going to tell you the same thing *tus abuelos* told me, "*échale ganas*." I made my legacy for you, now you go and make your legacy for your kids. I'm eternally grateful to God for making me your mom. Now I'm releasing you into the world. I've kept you close to me for as close as I could, now it's your turn to tackle the world.

Los quiero, hoy y siempre!

Mom

Author Biography: Maria is a rising second-year at Loyola Marymount University studying Finance in the College of Business Administration. She grew up in Hayward, CA before moving south to Los Angeles, CA. She is a first-generation, Salvadoran, college student. She comes from a low-income family of five and is the eldest of three. She grew up believing that everything has a purpose and her purpose is to make her legacy.



Imposter Syndrome

Megan McNaughton

Author's Note: This podcast explores the idea of the imposter syndrome within first generation students. Chatting with Shanequewa Love and Alexia "Lexie" Pineda Soto, I aim to get to the bottom of the root causes, effects and healing aspects of this common affliction in first generation college students.

Podcast Link: <https://soundcloud.com/megan-mcnaughton-484684230/first-gen-the-imposter-syndrome>

Author Biography: Megan McNaughton is a creative and nonfiction writer based in Los Angeles, California. Living in both the creative capital of the world and a hotspot for activism, she finds a balance between writing poetry and journalism. In June 2019, she graduated from Santa Monica College with an AA in Journalism. Continuing her education at Loyola Marymount University, she plans on earning her BA in English with an emphasis in creative writing by December 2020. Through language she one day hopes to open the minds of others to new possibilities and revelations, as well as bring awareness to global issues.

going in circles



figuring it out.

A Photo Collage

Haley Gronski

Author's Note: This piece is a collage of photos I have taken during my time as a photographer for MANE Entertainment at LMU. As a first-generation college student, I have always been encouraged to chase after my dreams and incorporate a strong work ethic into all that I do. My position at MANE Entertainment was no exception. I utilized photography as a medium to not only document events but to capture the very essence of unity present at LMU. Each image represents a sense of individuality, specifically about talent, age, ethnic background, and personal interests. My journey as a first-generation student has taught me to value every human identity and to ensure that no story goes untold.



Author's Biography: Haley Gronski is currently a student at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. Haley majors in Film and Television Production and double minors in both Screenwriting and Theatre Arts. She is also a digital media producer at LMU's on campus entertainment company, MANE Entertainment. Haley is very passionate about telling stories through various artistic mediums, especially film, photography, and theatre arts. As an aspiring cinematographer, Haley spends much of her free time working on LMU student sets.

Child of the Corn

Quetzali Lopez

Author's Note: "Child of the Corn" was a short script inspired by my family's taqueria in Chicago. The story is intended to be a light comedy, but still addresses the issues of gentrification happening in cultural communities. Xiomara and her little brother, Abel, are working at their family's restaurant when they discover a new yuppie taco joint has opened up across the street. While Abel is excited to scope out the competition, Xiomara is concerned about how can affect her family's work.

CHILD OF THE CORN

Written by

Quetzali

Lopez

NOTE: Read Lopez's "Child of the Corn" short script on *First-Gen Voices*, Volume 9 landing page.

Author Biography: Quetzali Lopez was born and raised in the Chicago area, where she often worked at her family's Taqueria. Since childhood, Quetzali developed a passion for storytelling. She enjoys writing, drawing, and spending time with her cousins. The most important part of her life is her family, and they continue to inspire her every day. Being a first-generation student, Quetzali highly values her education, because it allows her to explore new fields and opportunities. Currently, Quetzali is in Los Angeles attending Loyola Marymount University as a Film Production and Chicano/a and Latino/a Studies double major.

Through the First-Gen Looking Glass

Marieann Garzon

Author's Note: The work I am submitting is my personal narrative, which is a consolidation of my first-gen college experience. It is my formal, yet informal, amateur perspective of my own experience. I recount my encounter of what college meant to me before stepping foot on my beautiful LMU campus. My perspective has been formed through the first-generation college student lens that will forever impact the way I write the rest of my story.

My college experience, or should I say my first-gen college experience, has been unlike no other. I am writing my own story as I live it. I am writing a part of my mom's story, my brother's, and even my dad's—as inexperienced from the education sector as he may be. I am sitting on a chair at LMU now solely because of the sacrifices my parents have made, and continue to make, up to this point. I have also made sacrifices from day one; it was my own perseverance and dedication to building a name for myself and my own future that granted me a spot on this campus.

I remember thinking during my senior year of high school that the next four years could be the worst, most terrifying years of my academic career, or probably even of my life. All that danced around in my mind was my high school teachers explaining the rigor of college courses, as if the deadly International Baccalaureate Program had not been enough; and all the while my mom kept going on about having to stay focused on one career because college was no game. Then there was me, haunting myself with visions of being surrounded by people who did not look like me, who thought I spoke or dressed funny. Never did I fathom that I would encounter my own people, not Latinos or Latinas, but first-generation college students.

This was the one title I had been missing all along; only it was not a title, it was a sliver of my identity. It explained why my mother had pushed me so hard and taught me the importance of an education. It explained why my father was not around for school events, or when it came to doing homework at the dinner table, he just didn't know how to help. It explained why I had to fill out eighteen college applications alone and why I had to complete the FAFSA twice because the government just waits for any mistake to pounce on you.

While at LMU, I have been living my life to the fullest, as much as I can. I commute daily from home, as living in a box on campus is equivalent to a whole car. My mom is also the one who drives me to school at the crack of dawn with my brother in the backseat. I do not have a driver's license yet because my parents neglected any opportunity of teaching me because they believed that is what they were there for: driving me to all places and catering to my every need.

As a daughter of immigrants, and a first-generation college student, I can say that I have looked at the world through a different colored looking-glass than most, a beautiful one at that. Being sheltered is not something that has held me back, but instead has encouraged me to pursue unknown endeavors eagerly. So, when I say I am writing my own story as I live it, I really am. There should not be one rigid path we all take, it should be created along the way. Live spontaneously and with meaning.

Author's Biography: Marieann identifies as a Latina, first-generation hard-of-hearing college student. All of her identities have built her passion for her community, culture, and wonders of the world. As a Spanish and Journalism double major, she attempts to tie in her identities into her work to give a better understanding of what she stands for, and the important features of life that have gotten her to where she stands now.

November 18th

Brisa Gutierrez

Author's Note: The following is a narrative of a single moment that transformed my first semester in college and began a chain reaction of events that tested every aspect of my identity. It exemplifies some of the struggles/experiences that I faced as a first-generation college student that was thrown into a new environment that I have not been trained to navigate, and how I managed to get through my first semester of college. It follows my progression throughout the semester and provides a comparison to my thought process now. This narrative is a reminder that things do "get better" with time.

It was November 18th around 6pm and I was in my friend's dorm room when I felt it. Prior to coming to LMU, I had received many words of encouragement, of advice. I had heard it all, from "you'll be fine" to "it'll be hard, but worth it" to "watch out for the freshman 15." My older cousins had given me a glimpse of what college was going to be like, but no, there was absolutely no way that anyone could have prepared me for what I felt on November 18, and what I would continue to feel throughout my first year as a first-generation college student.

On November 18th, my friend came back from an important school trip that I had the opportunity to go on yet passed. As my friend began to tell me all about the trip and the amazing experience he had, the great people he met, and basically what a great opportunity I lost, I felt something inside me that I had not been entirely aware of. That night was the first time I genuinely, and with every part of my being, felt a lack of belonging. It was not that I was jealous of my friend for taking an opportunity that I had failed to take; it was more than that. I think it was a combination of homesickness, imposter syndrome, and a reaction to such a large change in my life that I was not prepared for. It was the first time in my life that I felt as though I genuinely failed myself. It was not the trip itself, or the fact that I was friends with everyone on the trip and I was missing out, nor the social justice issues covered on the trip. I was angry at myself. I was angry for not taking initiative and applying for the trip. I was angry that I let self-doubt stop me for the first time in my life. I was angry that this was the only opportunity that I thought I had at making friends and connections. This feeling that had been growing within me throughout the previous weeks was finally unleashed and it completely transformed my first semester of college. The root of this feeling could be traced back to move-in weekend, when the rest of the students moved in. I was quickly overwhelmed by the amount of new faces--most of which did not resemble mine--how impressive everyone around me seemed, and how much confidence everyone radiated. Never in my life had I felt so intimidated and suffocated in such a short span of time. This feeling of inferiority combined with culture shock and lack of friends had caught up to me.

From November 18th, until pretty much the end of first semester, this uneasy and powerful feeling inside of me remained. I had made some friends, was doing considerably well in my classes, had joined some clubs, and yet, the feeling still nagged at me. I spent most of my days wallowing in self-doubt that I eventually began to consider dropping out of school.

One of the most frustrating things about this whole experience was telling others about it. Every person that I told gave me the same advice. Every person told me that they had felt the same way when entering college and that things would "get better." At the time it all felt so frustrating.

How could these people possibly understand how much this feeling has taken control over my life? How could they understand how much I hate it here? Eventually I stopped telling people because they were not telling me what I wanted to hear, and of course, that annoyed and frustrated me more. To my surprise, things did, in fact, get better.

That trip was a catalyst to the series of unfortunate events that was my first semester of college, but things did get better. I took winter break to heal and think about how much power I allowed this feeling. How much I let it deteriorate my first semester and decided not to let that happen again. Second semester, or at least the first half of it, was a complete change. The confidence I had lost my first semester slowly came back and I witnessed myself becoming more involved in activities and clubs. I was more present in CLC, joined a service organization, found a group of people that understood and encouraged me, planned and co-hosted a workshop, went on a fruitful retreat, and through all of these, I made new friends. Second semester, as everyone had predicted and told me, was better than the first.

That feeling that I discovered in my friend's dorm on November 18th never left me and I suspect never will, and although I hate it, it has taught me a lot about myself and my resilience. First semester me would not have guessed that second semester me would genuinely love LMU, yet here I am. First semester was a train wreck, yet it taught me more about myself than any other experience I have had, and for that I am proud. Proud of myself for not giving up when all I wanted to do was cry in my dorm every day and come home. To my surprise the biggest lesson I learned is that it does, indeed, get better.

Author Biography: Brisa was born in Mexico City, Mexico raised in Rowland Heights, CA, and is a first-generation college student at Loyola Marymount University majoring in Communication Studies. Her on campus involvements include the First To Go Scholars Program, Christian Life Community, Latino Student Union, MEChA, and Sursum Corda Service Organization. Some of her hobbies include Disneyland visits, exploring new restaurants, watching movies with family and friends, and meeting new people. When on campus, she enjoys beach trips, quality time with friends, and engaging in new activities.



remembering.

Suburban Destinasia: A Reference

Saúl Rascón Salazar

Author's Note: In an obvious reference to *Suburban Destinasia*, an album by Jelani Aryeh, the piece of digital art exemplifies the artist's roots and tastes through the usage of Arizona state symbols and metaphors within the album being referenced.

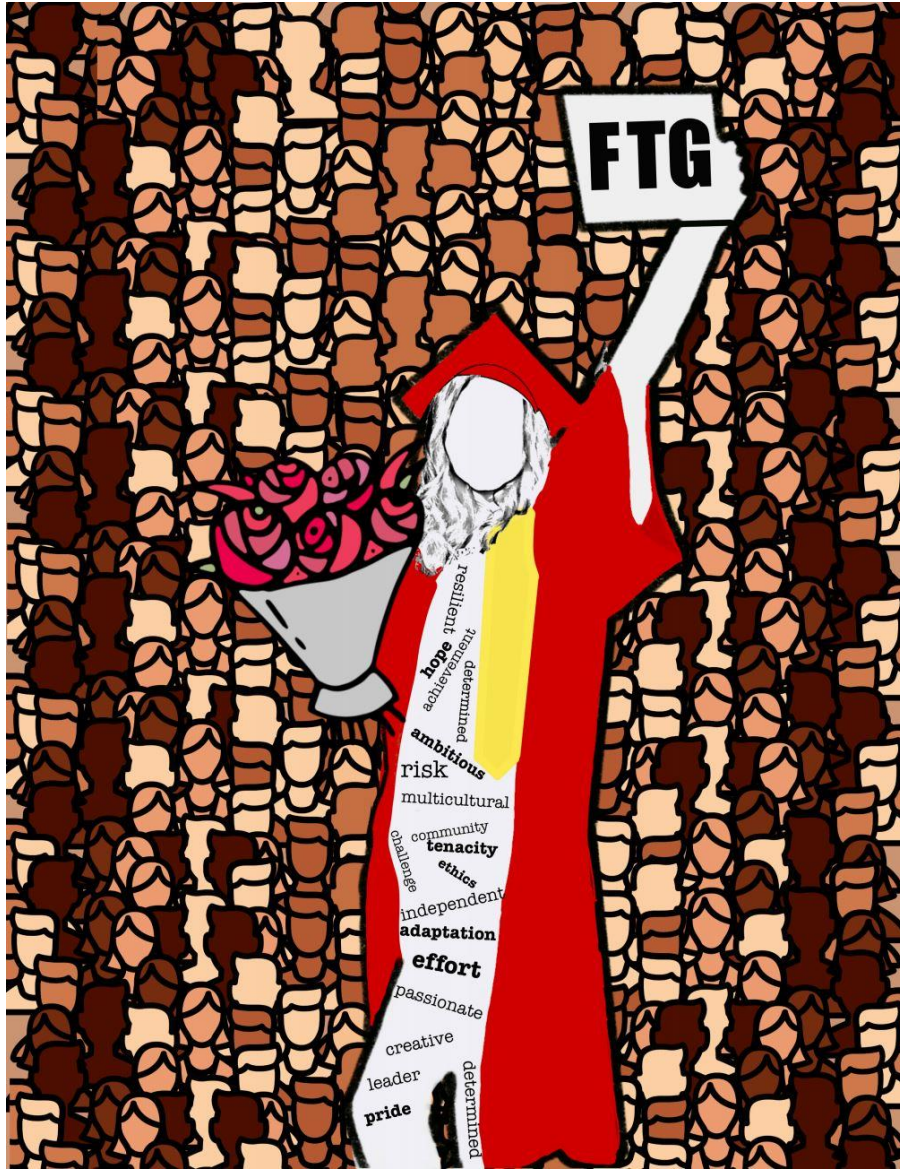


Author's Biography: Saúl is a sophomore from Phoenix, AZ studying International Relations and minoring in French in hopes to one-day practice immigration law.

When We Break Cycles

Mariel Gissela Fuentes

Author's Note: The illustration I created is meant to symbolize what I imagine a first-generation college student feels moments after walking the stage. There is excitement and happiness. The words that make up the graduate describe qualities of many first-generation college students. The background represents the communities we come from, and the people that motivate and support us along the way. A degree means a broken cycle and a win not only for the individual but also for their family and their community.



Author Biography: Born in Culiacan, Sinaloa but raised in California in a small town called Arvin, Mariel decided to test all my odds when she left home to pursue her career goals. She is now a freshman at Loyola Marymount University, working towards a degree in the school of Business. Some of her roles on campus include Chair of Service and Recognition for the Residence Hall Association and member of Belles Service Organization. In the upcoming years, she hopes to continue finding ways to be involved with her community and look forward to creating everlasting memories.

I'm Off Key

Renato Guzman

Author's Note: This piece relates to the first-gen themes of identity, search for purpose, and success. This piece is about my first visit to Guatemala where my inability to speak Spanish made me feel like a stranger and like a mistake. I wrote this poem in hopes that I could relate to others like me who struggle at speaking another language and at some point, have felt like a failure. My piece goes in depth about how I felt during my visit, as my Guatemalan identity was challenged and carried many fears such as failing expectations and how my sister would face these challenges. By embracing inheritance, my hunger to search for my missing half motivates me to go beyond the distance so that, one day, I can speak my family's language. Today, I continue to improve my Spanish speaking abilities so that next time I can feel at home in the country where my parents were raised.

I'll never be

I'm off-key.

Entering a new world,
Leaving behind my comfort zone,
For a time with dad's family.
But after one conversation,
Everything got worse from there.

What?

No Spanish?

That's a shame.

A shame on me.

Maybe with more effort,
I could blend in.
Instead, they laughed at me.
They mocked me.
They ridiculed me.
Despite my best
I wasn't good enough.

Then there were the parties.
Lyrics foreign to me
And everyone asking me to dance.
But how could I dance like them?
With every step I make
Judgement invokes.

Because of my lack of voice,
I was a target for names...
Cachetón.
Niño rata.
Gringo.

Secluded in the hotel room,
Free from exposure,
Trapped in isolation,
Away from home.
Missing my mother
But especially my sister,
Awaiting the voyage to this new world
And holding great expectations;

But how could I tell my sister
That we aren't exceptional?
How could I tell her
That our faces are nothing more than a disguise?
How could I tell her
That the only way to have a sense of decency is to
remain silent?

Branched by looks
And divided by language,
I felt out of place.
A disgrace to my Spanish name.
Constrained in chains,
Unable to break.
My dad's family loves me
But can't accept me.
Even if I improve my flaws,
I'll always remember...

I'll never be
I'm off-key

Author's Biography: Renato Guzman is a freshman at LMU studying political science. He aspires to be an immigration lawyer in the future believing that he can change lives for the better and use law as a tool to improve the Latinx community and defend the innocent. He lives in Van Nuys with his sister, parents, and Yorkie-Terrier mix. He enjoys comics, hikes, sight-seeing, beaches, traveling, basketball, trying new things, and barbecue ribs. He's a sucker for a good action, comedy, or adventure film, and if he's really bored, he's probably brainstorming future poems and stories that he will share with the world in the near future. You can connect with Renato on Instagram @guzmanator420.

Grandmother's Hands

Karina Julissa Pena

Author's Note: This piece is a black and white silver gelatin print shot by Reyna Pena. In this photograph you can see me holding hands with my grandmother. To me, this piece represents my first-generation experience because everything I do is for all those who helped me get to where I am. It also reminds me that what I am doing will leave a legacy for those after me.



Author's Biography: My name is Karina Julissa Pena. I was born and raised in Santa Fe, New Mexico. I am currently a freshman at LMU and am studying Psychology.

Pushing the Comfort Zone

Aviva Schwaiger

Author's Note: This piece is about how my being an immigrant and first-generation student has impacted my freshman year at college.

The 14th of September 2005, was the day that I stepped foot in America for the first time. I was probably holding my stuffed rabbit Flopsy in my right hand and my mum's hand in my left. I would have walked through the airport, a small 5-year-old with sand blonde hair, not realizing that I had left Australia for good. My freshman year of college, as any good college experience should be, was filled with hundreds of firsts. The first conversation I had was with a girl from Brazil who would become one of my closest friends. The first time I got an A in a college class. The first time I slept through one of my classes (first semester, second day of class). But the most important "first" was just getting to college.

I am the first in my family to go to college. This was not the plan that my parents had envisioned. Although there was never a doubt in my parents' mind that I would be attending college, it was tied to the idea that I would be attending University "back home." Even throughout senior year, there was always the possibility (and maybe secret hope) that I would decide to fly back to Australia and attend University there. The problem was that despite how much I missed Sydney, it was no longer home. That's the issue with being a Third Culture Kid, there is always an expectation that you will one day return to your "home" or passport country. But what happens when you no longer feel connected to that country? When that country is no more home than the others that you have lived in. I have moved roughly every four years between America, Australia and China. Each place that I have lived in is just as much a part of me as the other. After completing all four years of high school in San Diego, however, I began to feel more connected to the U.S. than I had before. Being able to attend college in the U.S. was my first step in cementing myself as an almost American.

Another huge first that I had in college was when my family and I were all approved for our Green Cards. Being granted Green Cards meant that I could continue and complete my school year without having to fear for my Immigration status. This is a privilege that I do not take for granted. Before coming to college, I never really thought about how I was an international and first-gen student. I felt American enough to fit in and assimilate, but it wasn't until I got to the Common Application that I realized just how out of the loop my family and I were with the American college system. Being both an international student and a part of the First To Go Program at LMU has allowed me to realize just how meaningful these identities are. These two identities have shaped my college experience and provided me the support systems to ensure that I succeed.

I believe that one of the most important steps to succeeding in college is seizing every opportunity that comes your way. When I was making my lists of the ideal college in senior year, at the top of my list I wrote how I absolutely did not want somewhere that was overly religious and Greek Life heavy. Well, I ended up at Loyola Marymount University—a Catholic-Jesuit institution—joined Christian Life Community (CLC) my first semester and joined Delta Zeta Sorority my second semester. As ironic as it is, being in CLC and a sorority are two of the most important

and meaningful experiences I have had in college so far. I became close to a girl during my First Year Retreat who ended up being in my CLC group and has now become another one of my closest friends. My best friends who lived in the same dorm hall as me all ended up in the same sorority. A sign I take as us maybe being friends for life. Through my sorority, I was able to get onto a senior's thesis set, and my CLC leader gave me the opportunity to work on a junior's documentary, an experience that helped me realize my love for sound design and production. As a writer on HerCampus, I have written about the importance of Korean film and have been vulnerable enough to share my struggles with Ehlers Danlos Syndrome. My point is, that in college going out of your comfort zone is almost always worth it. Especially as first-gen students, by being involved we are claiming this campus as our own and proving that we belong.

My younger brother will attend University next fall, making him the second in our family to attend college in the U.S. A few years after him, hopefully, my youngest brother will be the third. I hope that through my first year I have led by example and shown my brothers that if I can succeed, surely, they can too and maybe even better than I.

Author's Biography: Aviva Schwaiger was born in Sydney, Australia and has lived in Shanghai, San Diego and Los Angeles, CA.

A Response

Denise Espinoza

Author's Note: I will be writing a response to the poem, "first generation immigrant" by Rupi Kaur that highlights my journey as a first-generation college student.

First-generation college student

Kaur said they have no idea what it is like

She was right

Those who have not walked in my shoes have no idea what it is like

To feel alienated

Insecure to use my voice in a room full of

All that people of color need to do is work hard be successful responses

I tremble at the thought of the odds being against me

All I have worked for does not guarantee me any escape from the degrading statistics

Any escape from a system designated for my kind

While I work twice as hard in a system not meant for my kind

While I work twice as hard for people that are not my kind

I am bridge of two destinies split between two lands

And the descendent of the people who have sacrificed their lives and native land

I am the first-generation American

Not American enough for the American system served for the fortunate

I am the first-generation college student

Perceived as not as capacitated for a system served for the fortunate

The melanin and native tongue of my antecedents

Has bled into my genes

I am a Mexican-American Woman

The color of my skin and the language I prioritize *se entregan completamente a los prejuicios*

Que me prohíben alcanzar el American Dream

The American Dream that lured my parents into a system that molded them into laborers that have no advancement

No success

No validation

I am the bridge between two very distinct journeys

The bridge that has broken down but has been constructed by my people over and over

Constructed by students of my kind

By people of color with the same struggles

By people of color on both ends of the spectrum of success

By faculty that recognize and help us fight against the statistics and prejudice that oppresses us

Each time more resilient
Strong enough for those that walk over me to cause no further damage
Each time, I learn to use my voice
Each time, I learn to use my intelligence
Each time, I learn that I have the potential

I can and I will succeed.
I will be the last bridge that crosses to the journey of success
All that is left ahead is a road of success
Si se puede

Author's Biography: Denise identifies as a Latinx first-generation student from Inglewood, CA. She is a rising sophomore and Sociology major currently focusing on crime and violence. Her research assistantship at LMU has given her exposure to great career development opportunities and she plans to attend graduate school for a Ph.D. in Sociology. She is looking forward to embarking such an incredible journey with her family!



Lack of Reciprocity: Black Women Bearing the Burden in Higher Education

Tiana Lockett

Author's Note: This piece explores the intersectionality of being a Black woman and a first-generation college student and highlights the burdens that come along with being bound between these two identities.

My success is not my success alone. I credit my success to my ancestors who paved the way for me to have a chance at life with promising opportunities. I also credit my success to my community that supplies me with the motivation to see above and beyond the circumstances of reality. At the forefront of my gratitude is God, the Being who makes all things possible. Although I view my success as a collective endeavor that aids me through my trials and tribulations, in the same breath, it exacerbates a great deal of strain both physically and mentally. Through engagement with women, specifically Black women, I have grasped that there is this shared struggle of bearing burdens. In other words, Black women often extend beyond themselves, carrying the misfortunes of others while trying to mediate those misfortunes. Black women are left drained by the energy they outpour while using their life as a testament of God's grace for others to appreciate. Black women across many generations, geographical locations, and various settings can attest to the struggle of bearing burdens. As a first-generation college student and a minority on my college campus, I have inherited the struggle. At university, I have been granted the opportunity to meditate, allowing me to synchronize with my mind, my body, and my spirit. It has become evident through my meditation and my reflective nature that the exertion of myself on this campus as a Black woman has festered itself into negligence of my mental health. My negligence holds the power to destroy the foundations I have laid down for a promising life or holds the power to restore me into the woman who rises above it all.

In the words of the late Malcom X, "The most disrespected person in America is the black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the black woman. The most neglected person in America is the black woman" (00:02:19 - 00:02:31). The words of Malcolm X held true before he could conjure the thought, at the time he delivered the speech, and in the present moment. With the framework of today's societal structure, this will forever be a reality for Black women in America. Black women have not chosen to be scrutinized to the degree that they are by everyone around them.

Nonetheless, Black women have taken on the struggle and have aimed to live gracefully in spite of this current reality. This idea is nicely put in part one of the book *Black Women's Mental Health: Balancing Strength & Vulnerability*. It reads, "Since the arrival of the shores of the United States, women of African descent have been assaulted by the intersection of racism and sexism" (Evans et al. 43). Alternatively stated, Black women are bound by two identities that have been strategically designed to hinder their rise to the next level.

Part of Black women's identity is their black identity, which comes with harsh punishments and rules already in place to put them at a disadvantage. Another part of their identity is being a woman in a society that pushes subservience and treatment inherently meant to promote their male counterparts and stifle their own growth. Black women are navigating a system that doubly works against them. Although they have prevailed, Black women face a cost unfavorable to them in the long run.

Black women have mitigated the prejudice against them by viewing the blockades in place as drivers to reverse the status quo. Black women have done so by "embark[ing] on a mission to redeem these negative images by supplanting them with their own: the StrongBlackWoman" (Evans et al. 43).

The StrongBlackWoman persona is best understood as a Black woman who defies the odds and exudes great strength against the obstacles that are placed before her.

A study entitled “Disentangling Influences of Strength and Self-Silencing on Depressive Symptoms among U.S. Black Women” defines the StrongBlackWoman persona as “an amalgamation of beliefs and cultural expectations of incessant resilience, independence, and strength that guide meaning making, cognition, and behavior related to Black womanhood” (Abrams et al.). On the surface, this persona appears to be a model to follow, but a more in-depth look into the effects show that it causes more harm than glory.

Many Black women are exhibiting characteristics of strength, but behind closed doors are deeply struggling. The study exploring Black women’s pursuit of strength describes Black women “being overwhelmed by pressures to embody strength and be resilient for their families and communities” (Roberts et al.). Black women have also adopted a perceived pressure causing them to “refrain from inconveniencing others with their emotional issues and needs” (Roberts et al.). The suppression of feelings by many Black women festers itself into anxiety, depression, anger, and sadness. If left untreated, it can harm not only the Black woman subduing how she truly feels but can also harm those who truly love and care for her but are clueless to her current state.

Being in a setting like university heightens the way in which Black women subdue their feelings because the portrayal of a university is that every student is having the best time of their life. As a first-year student in my first semester, I can attest to the suppression of my feelings and the adoption of the StrongBlackWoman persona. The reason being is because I see my education as bigger than myself. I am the first in my family to go to university. I was born and raised in a community where many individuals do not see themselves in a position beyond their current circumstances. It was constantly reiterated to me as a young child that many children in a position like myself do not attain the dreams I proclaimed to achieve in due time.

Being that I rose above the naysayers and achieved university status, it is in me to work hard because I know how far I have come and how far I can go if I remain committed and steadfast. In my first few months of being in university, I have taken advantage of the resources and opportunities at my disposal, joined multiple student organizations, networked with alumni and faculty, traveled, and explored. I did this all while working two on-campus jobs, managing relationships back home, building and sustaining healthy relationships in college, and most importantly studying and working hard to make sure that my academics are up to par.

I have been giving so much of myself to activities, events, and people that I am left drained and unfulfilled in the end. It becomes even more difficult when the things and people I am investing time in have the picture-perfect portrayal of me, but do not hold the true reality because I am worn-out both physically and mentally from my investment. I have internalized and am aware of these feelings of burnout, and now is the time to either allow my feelings to overtake me or rehabilitate to betterment for the forthcoming months and years in my journey.

On October 9, 2019 I was free writing in my journal after completing a full twenty-minute meditation and stated: “I have never felt so lonely. It is a hard pill to swallow but I will have to digest it in order to improve from it. I have to be better for not only myself but for my family. They are depending on me and I do not want to let them down. I have to be better mentally.” This statement reveals that I had knowledge of my unstable condition. At the time that my pen met the paper and wrote these words, I was in a state where I did not want to succumb to the pattern of allowing negligence to my mental health overcome me. However, there was, and quite frankly still is, an element of the StrongBlackWoman persona impeding on my psyche.

The want to be better mentally had an attachment to an idea and individuals outside of myself. My driving force was my family and the want to succeed in a cutthroat environment like university. This

is a reality for many Black students in university. An article on *Mental Health Help Seeking African American College Students* states, "...the cultural teachings among African-American families, such as the high value of privacy (e.g., "keep family business within the family"), may deviate from the basic principles of formal treatment (e.g., disclosure) and may inevitably translate into underutilization of professional mental health services" (Barksdale and Molock). Otherwise put, there is a stigma surrounding mental health issues in the Black community. The framework of mental health in the Black community is that a mental health professional cannot fix or mend your problems like you or your family can. This held belief is destructive as it forces you to bear the weight of your own struggles and brews a disconnected nature with the world around you.

In my first few months away at university, I felt myself giving into this mindset. I became extremely overwhelmed by all the activities, events, and people that I committed myself to that it began taking a toll on my mental and physical well-being. I was putting a great deal of effort and valuable time in everything other than myself. Recognizing my problem was the way I saved myself from further destruction to myself or those around me.

If I had ignored that there was a problem, I could have dismantled the structures that have been in place to ensure my success through university, and ultimately, my life's journey. Openly admitting to myself that I neglected my mental health protected me in ways that I could never have foreseen at the beginning of the semester. I am grateful for the attention paid to my neglect.

It is common nature for Black women to be so giving of themselves for the benefit of others that they forget about the status of themselves in the process. A study on the consequences of stress for Black women states, "...the consistent engagement in daily hassles manifests into chronic stress, causing many Black women to exhibit unhealthy lifestyle behaviors" (Evans et al. 220). The exertion of Black women in different areas of their lives put a lot of stress on them in both the mental and physical sense.

To reduce or suppress the stress that Black women accumulate, they may adopt unhealthy coping practices. A study reports, "Risky lifestyle behaviors such as alcohol use, unprotected sex, unhealthy eating, and lack of exercise may impinge on well-being, but may be considered as coping mechanism while dealing with stressors" (Evans et al. 222). Alternatively stated, Black women often engage in practices that are unsuitable to their physical and mental well-being because the stressors they are battling makes it difficult to find comfort in their lives. These practices to reach a state of comfort often lead them down a pattern of irreversible behaviors that can be life-altering for the worse. In the university environment, these feelings are exacerbated given the academic rigor, fast-paced conditions, and competitive nature.

For Black women in higher education, the pressures of bearing burdens often seem inescapable, so many women experiment with different practices to find solace with this reality. As a first-year student at the university I choose to attend, it was not difficult for me to find people and activities to engage in to diverge the focus away from my heavy stress burdens. Given the close proximity to a lively city, and the eagerness of the freshman class to indulge in activities readily not accessible to them at home, it occurred to me that I had the opportunity to participate in acts to alleviate my built up tension.

If I hadn't acknowledged that my mental health was an issue, then I would have found ways to garner comfort including partying, smoking, drinking, overeating, skipping class, and acting out of character. If I had taken this approach to my mental health, then I would probably be stagnant in fixing the problem or be in worse-off shape than I was when I noticed it was an issue. This approach would have diverted my attention away from my damaged mental state and uprooted a new set of issues that I would need to overcome, or simply allow to overcome me. The work that I put in to get me to where I am today would have slowly unraveled. My studies would have become the least of my worries. I would

have begun to chase after a feeling of detachment from my inner self, which would have most likely led me down a path of behaviors and practices that could have harmed my life and the after effects would have entangled those who love and care for me into the destructive cycle that I would have created. My negligence to my mental health in my first semester had the strength to destroy the foundation I set for a bright future, but it did not win because I acknowledged the problem that needed to be fixed and rectified it to the best of my ability.

Although my negligence to my mental health had the ability to dismantle structures in place in my life, it helped strengthen me into the young woman I needed as a young child. As Black women, it is ingrained into you as a young child to work twice as hard while at the same time being the model for your family to admire and appreciate. This framework makes it difficult to live life in accordance to how you see fit because there is always a greater consideration outside of yourself. When a Black woman chooses to attend university, it becomes even more difficult given the independence and the lingering message in one's psyche that she must succeed for the family's sake.

Also, when a Black woman chooses a university where she is a minority, it can become lonely given it may seem like there is little to one who can speak authentically to the idea of bearing burdens as a Black woman. It is stated that: "For some UBW (Undergraduate Black Women), their experience at PWIs (Predominantly White Institutions) leads to a sense of isolation, otherness, and no place to feel accepted on campus" (Hope 64). As a Black woman who is a minority on my campus, has battled with bearing burdens, and the StrongBlackWoman persona in my first semester, I can attest that it is a lonely position to be in. However, I was able to push through my first semester with an understanding of my mental state and a motive to reverse my state for the better. I was able to do so with an attentive eye paid to how I was feeling, which I credit to the exposure to meditation.

Through meditation, I was able to draw attention inward and recognize and appreciate the messages that are being sent to my brain from my body. This allowed for me to connect the dots and understand that the feeling of being drained came from overexerting myself with events and people on top of being a minority and facing the StrongBlackWoman persona that has been brewing inside of me since a young child. Although I was occupying spaces where I was one of a few Black students, or the only Black student in some cases, feelings of inadequacy would arise but I was able to see my worth and talent in spite of the fact. I began to closely examine the characteristics attributed to the StrongBlackWoman persona that I was embodying and began to find appreciation in the things that were fulfilling to me as opposed to those that were solely draining me.

Being a Black woman in society is difficult in itself and the pressure deepens when that Black woman chooses to pursue a degree in higher education. Pressures include programmed messages that tell Black women that they must overachieve in all that they do, while simultaneously staring adversity in the face with a smile and maintaining strength no matter how small or large the issue presents itself to be.

A large component of Black women's experience in higher education can be connected to racial battle fatigue. A study conducted on racial battle fatigue in higher education defines racial battle fatigue as "the physiological, psychological, and behavioral strain exacted on racially marginalized and stigmatized groups and the amount of energy they spend coping with and fighting racism." In other words, racial battle fatigue is the feeling one acquires after constantly validating his or her racial background and defending himself or herself against others who aim to persecute him or her on the sole basis of a feature he or she had no choice in deciding. This framework is the reality for many Black women.

Since childhood, it is ingrained in Black babies and young Black girls to go above and beyond because the playing field is not leveled in their favor. It is the words of the parents, messages found within the books, and pressures outlined by societal standards that seep hard work at all costs into the

minds of Black children. Childhood messages turn themselves into actions in the years of adolescence and adulthood. For Black women are always working to prove themselves. This framework of thinking can easily turn itself into an inward view of inadequacy because Black women are always working to show their worth, while it is presumed to already be present in women belonging to different ethnicities and races. This reality places a great deal of stressors on Black women.

The aftereffects of racial battle fatigue can ruin or revive. A study on Black college women coping with racial battle fatigue at historically and predominantly White institutions states, "Black college women in historically and predominantly White spaces become prone to experience racial battle fatigue as they attempt to reconcile these images with their own selfhood in the face of numerous racial macro- and microaggressions and misogynoir." Otherwise put, many Black women in the university environment have masked their struggles in such a way that it does interfere with their attempt to succeed.

In this first semester of university, I have not allowed my struggles to hold me back but rather propel me to where I want to be when my undergraduate years are over. I recognize that I am active in a space where many from my community have not stepped foot due to a variety of different reasons. However, I am here at university and I am aware of the honor and the privilege of being here. In the same breath, I am aware of how honoring it is for the university to have me here given the value I add through my work ethic, knowledge, passion, and perseverance. My negligence to my mental health had the strength to lead me down a destructive path, but I acknowledged the issue and implemented barriers to restrict me from falling subject to unhealthy behavior patterns. I took control of my mental health rather than allowing my mental health to take control of me. I aim to utilize my knowledge on mental health as it relates to Black women to be of assistance to other Black women who may be on the verge of making a decision that may cost them their life or the lives of others. I will be the Black woman that supports and cares for other Black women when they feel like they are alone, and every aspect of the world is working against their favor.

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Author Biography: Tiana Lockett is a freshman at Loyola Marymount University where she is majoring in Political Science and minoring in Bioethics. She is originally from Chicago, Illinois. On-campus she is involved in the First To Go Scholars Program, The Learning Community (TLC), Black Student Union, Sisters in Solidarity, and Out-of-State Club. Her professional aspirations are to become an attorney and open her own law firm specializing in criminal defense.

The Journey of a First-Gen College Student

Katherine Comasil-Hernandez



Author's Note: "The Journey of a First-Generation Student," is dedicated to all students who have struggled to get an education, and who have felt underestimated by the stereotypes that mark first-generation students. It is a short description of the multiple social inequalities and struggles some first-generation college students have to experience. This short story describes how difficulties empower students to become better every day despite social stereotypes.

I was born in Guatemala, the land of eternal spring. My childhood was full of happiness and love. I was always surrounded by people who cared about me. However, it was also full of social inequalities and stereotypes that were always trying to discourage me from giving up on my goals and dreams. I grew up witnessing stereotypes about how women cannot pursue a higher education and saw many of my friends get married to survive and depend on someone else—I always refused to accept this unfair reality. I knew that getting a higher education was a salvation for me and my family.

My little sister was born when I was thirteen years old. My family and I were very excited and happy about having a new baby at home. Everything looked to be alright, until one day, she got sick. We thought it was just a flu or something small, but it was not like that. My little sister was diagnosed with a terminal illness which makes her lungs die out more and more every day. It was devastating for my mother to hear this from the doctor who also said: "There is no cure for her illness." My sister's illness started to get worse, to the point where she had to spend her first year of life at the intensive care unit. The hospital became a home for me and my family, where the seconds, minutes, and hours felt like an eternity. After a year, my sister was discharged from the hospital, but everyday her illness was getting worse and worse. The doctors told my parents that they did not know how to treat her, and that they could no longer provide her medicine to help her. Witnessing all this, my family and I moved to the United States where my sister started to receive better treatment.

Moving to the United States was an opportunity for me to continue pursuing my goals. When my family and I arrived in the United States, we had one goal in mind: finding the best care for my terminally ill, little sister. Watching my sister battle her illness, and sacrificing so much as a family, fueled my aspiration to get a higher education. As a result, coming to the United States also meant having access to a better education that would help me achieve my goals. However, in my journey as a first-generation student, I witnessed so many inequalities and unfair acts that inspired me to continue fighting for my goals. I remember how one day at my high school, a large fight broke out between Spanish-speaking students and non-Spanish speaking students. The fight was so large that the police were called. When the officers arrived on campus, many undocumented students hid as they feared exposure to United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). I remember fearing for my friends and helping them to hide. While there, I was also confronted by the stereotypes that women who came to the United States can only work cleaning houses or as babysitters. I was surrounded by an environment that wanted to prevent me from getting an education and that was forcing me to confine to stereotype. But I always refused to be part of it.

I have always thought that butterflies are a mirror reflecting my process, same as they, I have had to go through multiple processes to be where I am today. I believe that butterflies represent my first-generation identity, and that every process is preparing me to fly far away one day. I believe that as first-generation students, we carry out so much strength and bravery that inspires us to be better every day. The social stereotypes that have tried to prevent first-generation

students from succeeding in life, are the ones inspiring them to be stronger than ever. Yes, we struggle to get an education. Yes, we have been underestimated based on our ethnicity. Yes, we have had to sacrifice so many things to be where we are today. However, the social inequalities that have shaped us, but have not defined us, have made us resilient students.

I have experienced these difficulties and many more, but every day I have learned to be stronger and to believe in my potential. I graduated from high school a year ago and was awarded a full-ride scholarship to attend my dream school. I am a first-generation student and I am not afraid of opening my wings to fly far away. I am resilient, strong, smart, tenacious, and unbreakable. I believe the power of believing in myself will allow me to make a change and represent my beloved community. I will fight every day to end the social stereotypes that have marked my community for years. I believe that when we aim for resources that help the smaller communities with the “smaller” voices, it ends up benefiting the larger community. I want to help people who cannot help themselves. I know getting a higher education will give me the opportunity and freedom to help my community and rise beyond the adversities.

Author’s Biography: Katherine Hernandez was born in Guatemala and moved to the United States to pursue her goal of getting a higher education. She loves to help others in need and enjoys teaching dance classes during weekends. She is a resilient and strong woman, who is committed to dedicating her life to helping marginalized people in her community succeed.

Graduation Cap

Ashley McCluskey

Author's Note: This is a picture of the moment we all threw our graduation caps up at my high school graduation. This moment represents celebrating all of the hard work I did in high school and starting a new chapter of my life going into college. As a first-generation college student, it is important to acknowledge all of my accomplishments that got me here and this picture reminds me that if I could make it through high school, I can make it through college. Graduation from college is something that my parents never got to experience, but it is something that I have to look forward to.



Author's Biography: Ashley is from Lafayette, CA. She is an environmental studies major at Loyola Marymount University and plans to minor in art this coming semester.

Dear First-Gen Student

Brayan Alexis Vazquez Galindo

Author's Note: In the following piece, I decide to write a letter for the incoming first-generation, freshmen students of Loyola Marymount University. In the letter I provide several pieces of advice for the students commencing their first year of college. I also hand them several tricks and life hacks I've wished I learned before entering college. I end the letter with several motivational words aimed to inspire the students for the upcoming future.

Dear incoming first-gen freshmen students,

As a recent high school graduate, the idea of college sounds exciting for some people, but scary for others. Being admitted and committing to Loyola Marymount University as a freshman will probably be one of the best decisions you could have made. The transition from high school to college can be a very scary experience; but you will come to find that it's also a very exciting and significant moment in your life. Living and learning at Loyola Marymount University for a year has taught me numerous life lessons as well as tips and tricks for reaching high academic achievements. With that being said, I have some valuable advice for you on how to make this transition into the "college life" a more memorable and enjoyable experience rather than a scary and lonely one.

My first tip of advice would be to take advantage of what campus life has to offer. LMU has numerous things occurring in and off campus every week for you to participate in. These include campus events, clubs, service trips, religious groups and sports games. When you first arrive on campus, I would suggest joining something in the first weeks of school. Campus events and student activities begin right away and there is no better way to meet new individuals. Joining clubs and attending campus events will expose you to new people, making it easy for you to make new friends. Meeting new people from around the community—and even the world—can make you have new positive perspectives and opinions on life. The boundaries in our lives, both real and imaginary, help each of us define who we truly are. This being said, our perspectives and opinions on reality really come down to our way of thinking, as well as taking in the perceptions and experiences of others. Alan W. Watts once famously said,

"We seldom realize that our most private thoughts and emotions are not actually our own. For we think in terms of languages and images which we did not invent, but which were given to us by our society" (Alan W. Watts).

Making new connections and friends is an important part of the college experience. Working together with various individuals and building a support system/team with your companions will take you, and your companions, far in life.

My second and most important tip of advice I have would be to take care of your mental and physical health. It comes to no surprise that college can take a toll in both your mental and physical health. While in college, do not neglect your health! Throughout the duration of your college experience, make sure to eat well and be sure to get enough sleep. Getting a good night's sleep can improve concentration and productivity and that's highly important for a college student. Not to mention, getting sick would mean not attending classes, which will result in lots of missed lectures and assignments. Becoming a member at the Burns Recreation Center and/or

participating in intramural sports is a great way of staying healthy, fit, active and will help keep your mind clear of any stress.

Lastly, from time to time you will question if you're able to single-handedly confront the unprecedented world of college life. And the simple answer is, YES! You're capable of achieving whatever you desire if you put your mind and effort to it. If you ever feel like attending college was a mistake, remember, no act occurs randomly that doesn't serve a purpose; everything that happens is meant to happen. Chance and opportunities don't come out of the blue, you must be willing to work hard in order to provoke them. Opportunities and change tend to work as an intertwined system. One's always destined to be encountered by change in life and it is quite possibly one of the most difficult things we face, but I've often heard that through adversity, one learns the greatest lessons about life. Moving away from everyone and everything is going to be mentally challenging. But once you overcome this hard experience, you'll soon realize that college has the ability to mold you into the person you strive to become.

Sincerely,

Brayan Vazquez

Author's Biography: Brayan Vazquez is a first-generation college student attending Loyola Marymount University. He was born in Mexico and is currently living in Albuquerque, New Mexico. He entered LMU as an undecided college student and is currently searching for the profession he wishes to pursue in life.

An All-Over-The-Place Kind of Story

Manuel Armendariz Castro

Author's Note: This piece describes my feelings, thoughts, and experiences that I had during my recently concluded freshman year as a college student. In it, I used all of the previously mentioned factors to direct the audience towards my final concluding sentence which tells why I felt this way during my first year, especially as a first-gen student.

If I was to narrate my first-gen experience during my first year of college, it would be an all-over-the-place kind of story. There were mixed feelings all throughout the year, some were good, and others were bad. I guess that this is what one should expect from experiencing something that is absolutely new to them, and that is exactly what happened to me. Nobody in my immediate/close family ever attended college, whether it was out of necessity or choice. I am fortunate enough to have the freedom to choose what I want to do with my life because, even though they may not always agree, my parents and family members are extremely awesome when it comes to supporting one another in any situation. Having said this, I decided to go to college for two main reasons. One of those reasons was the amazing opportunity I was offered for doing well during my high school years and that opportunity came in the form of a scholarship. Most of the time, being first-gen means that you are a first-generation college student from your family and more often than not, from what I've heard and experienced, this is because previous generations were facing many more financial challenges than we are facing today and money was a huge barrier for them to even consider attending a university. When I received the opportunity to attend college free of cost, I knew it was something I couldn't just let by. Secondly, I've always been a firm believer of education and I personally find it much more rewarding and valuable than just growing the skills to work a job, which are also important, but I think that with a higher education one has a better foundation and more versatility by the time we have to join the work force. This was the reason I had worked so hard all these years, always trying to do my best and focused on one goal and that was to strive for a better life both for me and my family and I do believe that pursuing a higher education is a step toward that goal.

I came into college blind as a first gen student, nobody in my family had experience on how to navigate college life. One of the things that comes up with this is a feeling of loneliness. I felt the pressure to do and learn everything by myself including how to register for classes, looking and learning at what a bulletin was and how to follow it, how to claim refunds from the school, how to fill out FASFA and other important student documents. After completing my first year, I now know that there are people whose job is to help students like me who are navigating through this big change, but at the start, I had no idea. The feeling of not knowing is also extremely daunting because you think you have to do everything by yourself, and then you stumble upon something that you don't really know how to do, and it just completely freaks you out. On top of this, classes don't work the same way they used to back in high school and the amount of material that is dumped on students just tires you out. I remember by the time we got to winter break I was exhausted, I needed a break from all the documents, paperwork, projects, and overload of reviewed material.

Up to now, I have only mentioned the downfalls of being a first-gen student, but I also have as many good assets as I do bad ones. First and foremost, is the independency. I think this a very common argument that many students make when they think of their transition to college, but I

really think this was a highlight for me this year. When I say independency, I am referring to the academics and extracurricular activities. Academically, I enjoyed being able to take more of a specialized set of courses of what I like to do unlike in high school where all students took exactly the same classes. In extracurriculars, I enjoy the variety of clubs and organizations that were offered on campus because it allowed me to become more open to new hobbies and open to other people. Being open is a recurring theme that I've seen all throughout the year, specially so in the second semester. When I first stepped in, I was confused, overwhelmed, and stressed about my new lifestyle but as I got the hang of this independency, I became more outgoing and open than I was used to being. By the second semester, I noticed that I could handle myself more around campus, classes, and meeting other people. This effect also translated into my work as well. My thought, opinions and voice were little by little merging with the material we were learning, specially so in the classes where writing was encouraged like Rhetorical Arts. What I want to end with is that my first-gen experience during my first year in school (before we were forced back to return to our homes) was not as much of a weakness as I thought it was going to be, but rather it served more like a boost that has put me in a place of larger confidence and initiative for myself that I previously didn't have.

Author's Biography: Manuel is a first-generation student at Loyola Marymount university. LMU is in Los Angeles, California, but he currently lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico which makes him an out of state student. He comes from a low-to-middle class Hispanic family which includes both of his parents and two younger sisters. He loves anything that is math or science related, which explains his choice to major in mechanical engineering.

The Cord

Hannah Agbaroji

Author's Note: My poem is about a black cord that each First To Go student was given on the first day of our summer orientation. To many of us, it holds great importance as it's a symbol of our first-gen identities, the starting point of our academic careers, and a motivator to fight for our end goal: graduation.

Placed around our necks, everyone stood
To receive a cord, as all of us should.
Well-deserved, hard-working students we've been
Fighting daily battles while living in our own skin
This cord we possess is more than just string,
Wound hundreds of times and bound with a ring.

It represents the future,
For our goals, it serves as a reminder, for First To Go it serves as a binder
Something that we all have in common.
Because they all thought we were at the bottom
Incapable of success and soon to be forgotten.
Ununited, lacking sense of community,
Living with no real purpose, no true destiny.

"But we have something to say to those people..."

Our cords are bound tight,
Embracing hundreds of other strings, dark as night
Symbolizing our close bond and our everlasting flight
From the persecutors and ones who didn't treat us right.
In hindsight we are able to grow and mature
Because there's been so much we were able to endure:
Discrimination, frustration, damnation,
But now we are a new creation,
Each string, represents a first-generation student,
Intertwined, we are all learning how to be more loving and prudent.
Growing together with one another.
Through the good and the bad, sisters and brothers.

For when we wear this cord, it will be a sunny day in May.
We will walk up that stage without a trace of rage,
Beaming, shaking hands, looking regal and grand.
We will look back and know that we fought the good fight
The seemingly hopeless and everlasting plight.
We have broken the chain and stopped the trend
That the haters thought we would continue without end.

As we would have made our greatest dreams come true.
A dream of our parents and their parents and theirs too.

As this cord represents a battle won, a new identity, a new someone, with
All the cynics stunned and shunned, not knowing what they have done.
Doubting a first-generation student? Only the act of a traitor.
This cord, our cords, represent the fruits of our labor.
A degree earned and all the haters burned.

Author's Biography: Hannah Agbaroji is a rising college sophomore from Loyola Marymount University. As a psychology major and bioethics and African American studies double minor, she is passionate about social justice and health disparities within marginalized groups.

