

**The Price of Being the Pride: The Psychological and Emotional Challenges Facing First-
Generation College Students**

by

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Caitlyn Stearns snuggles under a white blanket covered with paw print designs. Her room in an off-campus house that she shares with two roommates in upstate New York looks cold; it's September and the windows are open. Taking a break from studying, Stearns tossed her open biology textbook to the side. On the television behind her a video of kittens plays. "Background noise," she said.

A senior zoology major at the State University of New York at Oswego, Stearns is the first in her family to attend college, and while she's on the path to become a veterinarian, it's a path that has been punctuated with challenges.



Stearns working in a lab class at SUNY Oswego.

Courtesy of: Caitlyn Stearns

Like many who are the first in their family to go to college, Stearns didn't learn the term "first-generation student" until she arrived at the picturesque campus located 35 miles northwest of Syracuse. A first-generation student is a student with neither parent holding a bachelor's degree. But Stearns' difficulties aren't only because she is first-gen. She also has two learning

disabilities and anxiety, a condition which often manifests during exam time. Additionally, her family provides little support—financial or emotional—for the 21-year-old.

Indeed, emotional and physical trauma were as much a part of her childhood. Stearns never knew her parents and was raised by her grandmother. Her conservative Caucasian-American grandmother didn't support her college plans. Likewise, her grandmother hasn't helped her with her anxiety disorder, which is now being treated with medication and psychotherapy.

“It has worsened [my anxiety] and being a first-gen student was basically the cause for it. It's overwhelming to not have anybody to ask about stuff, understanding financial aid and applying for it was like a huge misunderstanding,” Stearns said.

Stressful environments or prolonged stressful situations can trigger anxiety, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics, anxiety disorders are the most common type of mental disorder in childhood with the most common mental illnesses in adolescents being anxiety, mood, attention, and behavior disorders. Symptoms of anxiety include trouble concentrating, fear of leaving home, and fear of separation from a loved one. Co-morbid disorders such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder and depression are not uncommon, and according to the National Institute of Mental Health, suicide is the second leading cause of death in young people aged 15-24.

“It’s the Pressure”

Each August, as college start dates approach, many incoming freshmen college students face worry. Thoughts of new friends, living away from home, and mysterious professors fill their heads. But for first-generation students, these feelings are often more intense than their non-first-generation peers. That’s because they so often lack of college readiness, familial support, and financial stability. According to the article, “Breaking Down Barriers: First-Generation College Students and College Success” by Lauren Falcon, many first-generation students come from a low socioeconomic status and may lack the financial knowledge and resources that students with college-educated parents have.

Over 1,200 miles away at the University of Florida, Emily Delacruz, 21, can relate to aspects of Stearns’ anxieties.

“It’s the pressure. The pressure of achieving success because my parents worked too hard and went through too much for me not to,” she said.

Delacruz, whose parents immigrated from the Dominican Republic in 1985, is a first-generation student who has anxiety. Delacruz believes being a first-generation student feeds her anxiety, which in turn impacts her academic life.



Delacruz with her parents at her high school graduation.

Courtesy of Emily Delacruz

“I consider anxiety subjective; it comes in different forms for everyone. I lost a lot of sleep and my emotions were definitely all over the place,” she said.

Cultural stigmas often prevent first-generation students from seeking help for their mental health. The culture which first-gen students are raised in, strongly influences their views of mental health. In many non-Western cultures, mental challenges are not addressed in fear of shame.

“I don’t think first-gen students are more likely to reach out. Regarding the cultural component, a lot of them end up being people of color or children of immigrants or immigrants themselves,” said Akeera Peterkin, counselor and clinical social worker at Purchase College. “If I were to look at it through a cultural lens, there is a lot of stigma in certain countries. Mental health is a very Westernized idea.”

The stigma of mental health is present in first-generation student Andrea Corilloclla's family. A senior at Franklin & Marshall College and president of her school's Sigma Lambda Gamma chapter, she is the daughter of Peruvian immigrants.

"Before college, I didn't know about mental health, I thought it [health] was just about the body," Corilloclla said.

Corilloclla's parents always believed feelings of sadness or being anxious could be prayed away.

"My family is still learning now since I've been diagnosed with generalized anxiety and depression, they don't understand everything, but they've gotten better," Corilloclla, who was born and raised in Miami, said.

Because of the coronavirus pandemic, Corilloclla is finishing her last year remotely and so doesn't have access to the mental health resources she enjoyed on campus in Pennsylvania.

"Because of state licensing and laws, my school doesn't offer therapy services in Florida; so that fucking sucks for me," she said.

Corilloclla said she sometimes experiences imposter syndrome, a psychological pattern characterized by a feeling in which an individual doubts their skills, talents, or accomplishments. Feelings of imposter syndrome can also include an internalized fear of being exposed as a "fraud" or feelings that you do not belong.

"It's like we're [first-generation students] trying to make space in a place that was never meant for us," Corilloclla said.

In her book *The Journey Before Us: First-Generation Pathways from Middle School to College*, Laura Nichols writes, “First-generation students are likely to assume it is their fault if they struggle more than students whose parents have college degrees, not realizing that the path is set up for those whose families have resources that allow them to devote their time and attention to being a student, do not need or require them to continue to help at home, and can graduate with little or no debt.”

In the United States, higher education is considered the key to unlock the door to social mobility. According to Nichols, higher education is systematically made more difficult for first-generation students to achieve. Thus, although possible, it is extremely difficult for many first-generation students to achieve social mobility.

Cultural Stigmas

Familial support is an important factor for first-generation students. In her article, Falcon expressed that parents or guardians who have not experienced college may not understand the amount of time and academic focus required.

“Conservatives have the idea that women should meet a man and not be educated,” said Stearns. “My grandma did not agree with my choice to get an education, she wanted me to get married to a military man.”

When Stearns decided to attend college, her grandmother kicked her out of the house. That was 2017. Since then, she has supported herself and education with student loans and

working at a veterinary center near the house she shares with her two roommates. She has also received financial support through Oswego twice.

Additionally, the onset of the coronavirus pandemic forced many students to return home, which wasn't always an ideal situation.

Students like Andrea Corilloclla returned to her Miramar, FL home at the start of the pandemic. Diagnosed with generalized anxiety disorder and depression in 2018, she comes from a family-oriented household. But it can sometimes be toxic. Corilloclla's parents often guilt her for spending more time at sorority meetings than she does with family.

"Time management is really hard; I no longer have a sense of freedom or individuality. It's never my time anymore," she said.

Corilloclla said culture plays an important role in her identities as both a first-generation student and a person with anxiety.

"A lot of times with Latino parents, the intent does not equal impact," Corilloclla said. "Latina moms can be very stubborn, and how do you tell someone things when they don't want to hear it?"



**Corillocla (second to right, back row)
with her parents and siblings.**

Courtesy of Andrea Corillocla

Corillocla’s parents immigrated to the United States from Peru when they were both 20 and after the birth of their first child, Corillocla’s older sister Alex. However, they weren’t able to bring their baby with them at first. When they arrived, they each worked three jobs to save enough money to send for Alex. During her college years at Florida International University, Alex became a U.S. citizen. Andrea says anxiety was present in her sister’s life.

Corillocla’s mother is a deeply religious woman who once told Andrea to pray whenever she feels anxious. When Corillocla told her parents about her anxiety and depression, her parents initially denied it, and while they became supportive, they are surprised she still struggles.

“It’s like she wonders how long it’s going to last,” Corillocla said.

Transition In late-July while working as a waitress to support herself and contribute to her family, Corillocla, who lives with her 92-year-old great-grandmother and is one of her primary caregivers, contracted COVID-19.

“I couldn’t get unemployment since I’m a student most of the year, but I only worked one day of the week at a restaurant,” Corilloclla said.

Suddenly, her older sister Alex who worked at the same Texas Roadhouse tested positive for COVID. Days later their mother tested positive.

“I knew I would be okay, but I couldn’t say the same about my family,” Corilloclla said.

Divided Identities

A 2016 report from The Center for First-Generation Student Success found that 56% of undergraduate students nationally were first-generation students. Among those students, 59% were also the first sibling in their family to attend college. First-generation students are also more likely than non-first-generation students to feel inadequate about their academic ability, social life, and socioeconomic status. These feelings can lead to higher drop-out rates or anxiety and depression.

Additionally, many first-gen students struggle with college readiness. According to Falcon, it isn’t uncommon for FGCS’s to work full-time while in school. Nevertheless, employment may interfere with attendance, homework, and school engagements that are critical to success. Many FGCS’s leave college to work more hours to support themselves or their families, or because college isn’t economically feasible.

Falcon found that some reasons for limited communication amongst FGCS's peers and faculty include the absence of similar interest and resources. These conflicts contribute to low levels of academic self-esteem and difficulty adjusting to the college setting.

. Grappling with divided identities is something Corillocla knows well as the now oldest sibling in her home, part caretaker for her great-grandmother, and student.

“There's that can-do attitude that most immigrants have: 'I'm gonna pull myself up from my bootstraps, I just did it, your generation is just weak', that kind of thing,” said Dr. Robyn Koslowitz, a licensed school psychologist and licensed clinical psychologist, based in New Jersey.

“Individual cultures, individual religious groups, individual countries have certain dialogues about mental health and generally there are stigmas, each culture is going to have it's own flavor of stigma,” Koslowitz said.

“Going to College Was a Big Thing”

Although the research on first-generation students and the term itself are fairly new, first-generation students and the challenges they face are not. good

According to the Washington, DC based Center for First-Generation Student Success, the definition of who is a first-generation student varies nationwide. Likewise, institutions, academic departments and programs at the same institution might have differing definitions. Some define it as a student with neither parent who has acquired a college degree, or a parent with only some

college. More recently, having a parent or parents with a degree obtained outside of the United States has been considered. “Because identification as a first-generational college student is most often self-reported in the matriculation process, there are inherent gaps in the data,” according to the Center for First-Generation Student Success.

Regardless of their generation, being uninformed of what the term first-generation meant is a similarity many first-gen’s have.

Delacruz, Corilloclla and Stearns hadn’t heard of the term “first-generation college student” until they were in college. Similarly, President of SUNY Purchase Dr. Milagros “Milly” Pena, who was a first-generation student, never heard the term during her time as an undergraduate.

“It was already after I had done my Ph.D., people started talking about first-generation because in higher ed they started trying to understand the challenges for different cohort of students,” Pena said.

Pena was born and raised in Manhattan in 1955. Her parents and grandparents immigrated from the Dominican Republic by boat during World War II. As a child, she often walked past Columbia’s 36-acre campus, which sits between Manhattan’s Upper West Side and Morningside Park.

As the daughter of immigrants and the first in her family to receive a high school diploma, attending college was important.

“Going to college was a big thing, Columbia became a symbol of the future,” said Pena.

Raised catholic and after attending a catholic high school, Pena graduated with a bachelor's degree as a triple major in Spanish, Latin American Literature, and Education from Iona College in 1978.

“It made my family feel comfortable that I would still be going to Catholic school. Little did they know they still party there as anywhere else, but they didn't need to know that,” Pena said.

Like most college students, Pena experienced stressors from school and home.

“Outside from school, my biggest stressor was my family. My father was an alcoholic and my mother was a schizophrenic, so I had to manage school and manage them,” Pena said.

“When I grew up, I just wanted dogs because they were a lot easier.”

For Pena, culture and generation played a role in the stigmatization of mental illness.

“I think that a part of that generation in particular [her parents] saw a lot of things that in their minds were seen as an embarrassment to the family kind of thing,” said Pena, “even though they struggled with mental illness it's not something that I thought I could speak about in school, so I internalized a lot of the stress.”

Born during the Boomer era, Pena said the civil rights and social justice movement permeated her college years. She also remembered the influence of leading New York feminists like Shirley Chisholm and Bella Abzug.

Chisholm, who remains one of her favorite female role-models famously said, “if they don't give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair.” Those words guided Pena during the

four years she spent as a first-generation Latina student at a predominantly white school. Like first-generation students today, Pena remembers feeling put down and intimidated.

“I was made felt inadequate. Other students would say things I didn’t even know existed,” Pena said.

However, in her true New York fashion and accent, she admitted having an attitude. Her peers soon found out; don’t get Milly mad.



SUNY Purchase President Pena on the Purchase College campus.

Credit: Twitter, @PurchasePres

While scant data is available about older first-generation students, according to the Pew Research Center, the percentage of children living with a parent with at least a bachelor’s degree was 15 percent for early boomers in 1969, 24% for Gen X’ers in 1987, 33% for Millennials in 2003, and 44% for Gen Z’ers in 2018.

The center also found that 89% of boomers like Milly said their college degree has paid off or will pay off compared to 62% of Millennials.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, nearly one-third of all incoming freshmen each year are first-generation. At SUNY Purchase, 17% of incoming freshman are first-generation students. In fact, universities and colleges nationwide are seeing a large shift in student demographics with more than 5.3 million of all enrolled college students coming from immigrant families, according to a 2020 New York Times study. The Times found that the percentage of first-generation and immigrant students increased from 20% in 2000 to nearly 30% in 2018.

The increase has coincided with the initiation of programs and scholarships, which support low-income and first-generation students like the Bonner Program, a scholarship supporting first-generation students which began in 1990. Some colleges have their own promises and programs to their economically disadvantaged students such as the San Jose Promise at San Jose Community College, which began in 2017.

State-wide initiatives include State University of New York's Educational Opportunity Program, which provides access, academic support, and financial aid "to students who show promise for succeeding in college but who may not have otherwise been offered admission." According to EOP guidelines those from historically disadvantaged backgrounds are prioritized.

According to Paul Nicholson, SUNY Purchase's EOP director, most EOP students at the college are first-generation students and students of color. Benefits of being a part of the program at Purchase include access to the college, financial support, counseling, a summer program, and

being a “part” of something. Nicholson said the increase in immigrant first-gen college students enrollment is because of the country’s increase in immigrant populations heading to college.

Nicholson said financial difficult plays a role in institution’s retention rates and that it also adds to their student’s stress.

“Most [first-generation students] struggle to pay for college, but not just first-gen, I see a lot of students struggle to pay for college,” he said.

Being A Black First-Gen Student in America

Black Americans have suffered more than any other group in 2020. According to the Center for Disease Control, there is increasing evidence that COVID-19 disproportionately affects some racial and ethnic minority groups. Black and Hispanic people comprise 58% of all COVID hospitalizations and 53% of COVID-related deaths, according to Stanford Medicine researchers. Political unrest, systematic racism, and killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery further contributes to the Black community’s trauma.

The DOE categorizes 41% of Black students as first-generation students. According to the Center for First-Generation Student Success, recent studies show Black students are facing a hidden mental health crisis; however, like first-gen students, they are not likely to get help.

Gavonne Dixon is an author, speaker, entrepreneur, and editor of HypeFresh magazine, an online entertainment and news magazine based in Philadelphia. He is also a Black man living in America. Dixon was born and raised in North Philly, a predominantly Hispanic and Black area

infamous for its reputation of violence and drugs. Nevertheless, he was a first-generation student at La Salle University, a private institution in Pennsylvania from 2005-2010. Along with being a first-gen student, all three of his children were born while he was in college.

“I was what you would define as an at-risk student, coming from the public school system of Philadelphia which is notoriously underprivileged and under resourced,” Dixon said.

Dixon said he “squeaked into college for having potential being Black.” Accepted into the school’s program for at-risk students, the now 34-year-old majored in chemistry simply because he earned an A in high school chemistry. Thinking college chemistry must be as easy as high school chemistry, Dixon soon realized he miscalculated. After struggling academically and taking a break from college, he lost his financial aid.



Gavonne Dixon (second to left) in a chemistry lab class in college.

Courtesy of: Gavonne Dixon

“I wound up not qualifying for financial aid and it was just a bunch of stuff going on-- I already had three kids, I got a family, so college kinda became a secondary thing at that point,” Dixon said.

It was when Dixon was searching for grants and financial awards so he could resume his studies, that he first heard the term first-generation.

“I developed this passion for first-gen students and kind of advocated in sharing that story of what we go through from a personal perspective, I think a lot of it for us is the lack of information, you don’t have that person who’s able to coach you through the difficult times who have been through it,” he said.

Today Dixon is planning on writing a book, *Unprepared, Unprivileged, and Overwhelmed*, which he accounts his personal experience living both on a private university campus and in a neighborhood where burying a friend is the norm.

“In my sophomore year of college my best friend was killed, it was probably the most devastating thing that ever happened to me at that time,” said Dixon.

The murder took a toll on Dixon, knowing that just a month prior he was still hanging out with the neighborhood guys. He felt depressed during college and had suffered from anxiety his whole life but never knew it. Furthermore, he was once again on academic probation.

“I missed class for two weeks after my best friend got killed, when I finally went back to class, I had this one professor who told me I missed a lot and when I told her my best friend was killed, she was like, ‘Yeah, but you didn’t die’ and I remember feeling like no matter what I do, I’ll never be able to change where I come from,” Dixon said.

The feelings of imposter syndrome intensified for Dixon and his academic performance suffered further. Similar to other minority communities, mental health in the Black community isn’t spoken about positively, which is especially true for black men.

“We know first-generation students are resilient, we’re intelligent, we’re innovative, but we’re dealing with mental health problems-- when we get stressed or anxious or depressed, the way we deal with that is not going to produce fruitful results,” Dixon said.

Dixon has also experienced racial discrimination, including on his own predominately white college campus. Security and campus police often stopped him. While boarding his campus shuttle bus once, a security guard asked for his student ID but he didn’t ask for anyone else’s. Another time, the police stopped him with guns drawn, for not having a back light on his bicycle.

“Not only do I have to be aware of the ‘thugs’ that you fear and learn how to conduct myself with them outside, but then I also have to worry about the people who are hired to protect me because they’re going to look at me and see me as one of them,” Dixon said.

At the 2019 First-Generation Student Success Conference, Dr. Kevin Kruger, President of The National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, spoke on data that Black students are more likely than their peers to leave college before graduating. Furthermore, Black students, especially women, have a higher amount of student debt than their peers.

Despite completing four years of college education, he couldn’t graduate because of the financial toll. University’s policy of withholding transcripts due to an unsatisfied balance prevented Dixon from finishing at any other college. However, Dixon’s experience inspired him to share his story on his website, Geo Dixon Speaks. He continues to advocate for first-generation students through motivational speaking, helping schools increase the retention and graduation rates of first-gen students, and creating the *First-Gen Forever* merch.



Gavonne Dixon with his wife and their three children.

Courtesy of: Gavonne Dixon

First-Generation in Every Sense

In search of the American dream, many first-generation students are also first-generation Americans. According to The Postsecondary National Policy Institute, English isn't a first language for nearly 20% of first-gen college students. Being an immigrant in the U.S. can mean language barriers, discrimination, and low socioeconomic status.

Sana Meghani and her parents immigrated to the United States from Pakistan when she was three-years-old. The family lived in Texas before moving to California when she was a teenager. Her difference from her peers became apparent to her in elementary school, which led to anxious feelings.

“Before the first day of class my stomach would hurt and I was really anxious, I was different from other people, I was the only Muslim Pakistani-American,” Meghani said^[CP1].

Meghani felt left out for most of her grade school years. She knew she was different in multiple aspects—her school lunch was different, her home language was different, and she remembers having different experiences from her teachers than her peers.

“I had really racist teachers when I grew up in Texas and post-9/11 growing up as a Muslim-American, it was really obvious that there were certain people who liked me and people who didn’t like me,” Meghani said.

While applying for colleges in her California high school, Meghani realized just how poor she was. According to first-generation student demographics, 27% of first-gen college students come from households making \$20,000 or less, compared to 6% of continuing generation students. However, figuring out how to pay for college was only half the battle for Meghani. Growing up in a conservative Muslim immigrant home, her parents were skeptical of American culture and the idea of sending their daughter to college

Meghani became a part of the TRIO’s Educational Talent Search program in high school. Through the program, she was given SAT and application fee waivers. In 2007, Meghani matriculated at UCSD as a political science and education studies majors.

During those four years, she worked three to four jobs to stay afloat. She often worried if she would be able to buy books or pay her rent. During this time, her father, the family’s breadwinner, was unemployed. He was shot at during a robbery shooting at the gas station where he worked. He left work because of post-traumatic stress disorder.

“He was unemployed for something like nine months, and I was sending money back home to help him while also being in college and trying to pay my own bills,” Meghani said. “It was definitely one of the most stressful times of my life.”

The financial stress coupled with the pressure to succeed became overwhelming. A resident assistant suggested to Meghani that she could benefit from talking to someone about how she felt. It was in therapy that she first learned about anxiety and was able to put a name to the feelings she had long experienced.

In 2011, she graduated from UCSD and ultimately returned to Texas. She now works in higher education for the Trellis Company, a nonprofit with the dual mission of helping students successfully repay their loans and promoting access and success in higher education.

“Ultimately my passion has been in giving back to my community,” Meghani said. “My goal is to ensure that more students of color, more first-generation students, students from low-income backgrounds, have the opportunity to go to college and receive a college degree. And hopefully give back to their community and make our community stronger.”



Meghani with her parents and sister and her graduation from UCSD.
Courtesy of Sana Meghani

The Solution

Despite a growing minority population nationwide, with the U.S. Census predicting the nation will be ‘minority white’ in 2045, representation of minorities in college who graduate has not. Indeed, in 2018, The University of Missouri at Kansas City noticed an alarming decline of their first-generation students’ retention rates and grade point averages.

Because of that, in 2019 the university established their Roo (nicknamed after the school’s mascot, a Kangaroo) program for their first-generation students. First-generation students comprise between 30% and 40% of their undergraduate population, Mia Flynn, the coordinator of the Roo program, said.

“We have many goals-- from a number’s perspective, we want to increase our retention rate and increase their [first-generation students] GPA’s. Our goal is to also assist with campus navigation, academic preparation, and social belonging,” Flynn said.

The Roo program recruits first-generation students at orientation through emails or postcards. Participating students receive introductory summer classes, are paired with a first-gen student mentor, and introduced to other first-gen students. They also receive a care-package, which includes a Roo tee-shirt, hot spots for Wi-Fi difficulty, and a \$100 stipend for books or supplies.

“First-generation students shouldn’t ask themselves if they are ready for college, universities should instead ask themselves, ‘are we as a university ready for first-gen students?’” Flynn said.



First-Generation Roo students at UMKC.
Courtesy of Mia Flynn

As a university that has created *First-Gen Proud* Zoom backgrounds for their students, UMKC strives to create an encouraging and welcoming community for their first-gen students. In 2020, the university was designated by the Center for First-Generation Student Success as a First-Gen Forward Institution. This designation from the Center recognizes colleges and universities that have proved a commitment of improving the experiences and outcomes of their first-gen students. There are currently 157 First-Gen Forward institutions recognized by the Center, with Binghamton University and New York University joining the list for the '20-'21 cohort.

The Road to Come

Senior year of high school is when the college jitters for most intensifies. Figuring out how to pay for college, what schools to apply to, and what to study are some of the stress-provoking questions high school seniors must ask themselves. The fear of the unknown and entering a new world hits many students, but this fear is especially apparent for incoming first-gen students as they do not have advice or much financial support from parents to rely on.

Brianna Velez, a senior at Fort Lee High School from Fort Lee, NJ is the oldest of her two siblings. She's also the first person in her house to apply to and attend college.

“It's a lot of pressure but in a way it's good pressure, it's exciting and it's a lot to be grateful for,” Velez said.

Velez plans on taking a pre-law track. She's especially interested in studying family and social justice and is enthusiastic about learning about human and civil rights. Already, she is a vocal advocate for women's and LGBTQ+ rights.



Velez, (left) and a cheer member on the field of Fort Lee High School.

Courtesy of Brianna Velez

Velez, who heard of the term ‘first-generation student’ from school counselors and universities, applied to in-state schools like Montclair State University, Rowan University, and Fairleigh Dickinson University. Nonetheless, the financial aspect of attending college worries her more than getting in.

“New Jersey is a very expensive state where there’s a lot of expensive schools, but if you apply out-of-state it’s even more expensive,” she said.

When she’s not doing schoolwork, Velez works part-time hosting at the nearby Aura Thai Kitchen in Fort Lee. Velez sees for herself the economic advantages some of her peers have and said the college journey is harder for her. Unlike many of her friends, she has to start from scratch financially.

Despite these financial gaps, she credits having a diverse group of friends as support.

“It’s nice to hear from other people and their perspectives because it makes you feel like you’re not alone in this because there are times where I break down like what am I gonna do, I’m so lost,” Velez said.

The high school senior deals with her fair share of anxious feelings.

“I don’t know how to say it, but they’re very out of the blue, I can have a perfectly fine day and if a little thing stresses me out it like opens a new door to a whole bunch of other things that stress me out,” Velez said. “It kinda gives me depression and I can be very unmotivated and just close my laptop and sit on my bed and be very negative.”

Velez talks with her friends to cope and is aware of the therapy resources available to her but does not take advantage of them.

Velez has a community behind her in everything she does as first-generation students have created a familial body of students, alum, and professionals. Programs like the Roo program, TRIO, EOP, and social media makes it easier for FGCS to connect and discuss their feelings and pressures.

First-generation students create a space for themselves in a place that they sometimes feel they do not belong. Despite the personal and mental health challenges they face, their resiliency and strength prevail.

“Being a first-generation student made me kind of have to support myself in the beginning, all the challenges were on me to figure out and I definitely came out of this strong and with a great understanding of the real world,” said Stearns.

Stearns says she will always remember the climate strike she helped put together on her campus and the advisors who believed in her.

“Before SUNY Oswego, no one believed in me. College has taught me what I really love and gave me the avenue to get there,” said Stearns.



**Stearns in Guardian Veterinary Specialists where she works.
Courtesy of Caitlyn Stearns**

Caitlyn Stearns is graduating from SUNY Oswego in May. Upon graduation, she will move to Ohio and work at Ohio State University, where she is waitlisted for its Master of Public Health program. Although she knows no one in Ohio other than the people she will be living with, she believes the unknown is worth it in the end.

“College was everything to me honestly,” said Stearns. “It’s scary to break these generational curses, but it is an amazing reward.”

Source List

1. Emily Delacruz; first-gen student
2. Lizcary Amarante; first-gen alum
3. Aliya Manjee; first-gen alum
4. Caitlyn Stearns; first-gen student
5. Andrea Corilloclla; first-gen student
6. Akeera Peterkin; counselor at Purchase College
7. Sana Meghani; first-gen alum
8. Sara McDonald; first-gen student
9. Mia Flynn; coordinator of Roo Program at UMKC
10. Dr. Milly Pena; first-gen alum & President of Purchase College
11. Stephanie Youngblood; first-gen alum & educator
12. Paul Nicholson; director of EOP/MAP at Purchase College
13. Brianna Velez; first-gen high school senior
14. Dr. Robyn Koslowitz; clinical psychologist
15. Joanna Lorin; first-gen alum
16. Patricia Bice; Interim Vice President for Student Affairs
17. Gavonne Dixon; first-gen alum

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