

Do I Belong Here?: The Struggles of our First Generation Students



“Maybe you think you’re better than us because you went to college.” These twelve words will always stick with me. Although they were said out of emotion and never meant to hurt me, they cut deep and made me question my identity.

As far back as I can remember my parents have taught me that I can achieve any goal as long as I dedicate myself 100%. It is because of my parents that I have reached the success that I have as a student, a teacher, and an adult. My mother and I have a close relationship. She is my best friend, my confidant, my shoulder to cry on, and my hand to hold. She’s the person I call when I need to make an important decision, or when I have exciting news. She raised me to know my worth, but also to remain humble and gracious.

In high school, going to college was the expectation and the culture of my school and our community reflected this. I am the first person in my family to go to college, and my parents were supportive and proud of my self-advocacy. However, being a first generation college student did not mean much to me at the time. Everyone around me was going through the same motions and obstacles on the path to college and I did not feel any different.

I pursued a degree in mathematics at California State University, Long Beach and graduated with university honors. The process completely transformed for my

identity and the way I evaluated my own intelligence. I had always identified myself as capable and felt confident in things like my likability or my ability to connect with people, but after becoming successful with mathematics, I felt confident in my mind, and this was incredibly empowering. This newfound confidence in my intellectual ability (and my dad's "just try it!" encouragement) led me to apply to the Stanford Teacher Education Program. The day that I was accepted is one of my proudest moments.

At first, I felt like an imposter at Stanford. I was one of only a few first generation college students. I could not identify with the narrative of most of my peers coming with bachelor's degrees from highly esteemed universities and families where multiple generations had attended college. I remember thinking, "Did they mean to pick me? Am I really as qualified as everyone else here?" It was difficult to believe that I actually belonged there. Thankfully, as classes got started, I felt valued and respected by the program and my peers. My identity as an educator for social justice was forming, and my intellectual confidence was growing rapidly once again. I had opinions about education, equity, and social justice, and I knew how to talk about them.

Coming home to visit my family started to feel different. Being fully immersed in an academic environment where I regularly engaged in class discussions around important topics in education made me aware and alert about being careful and precise with my words. I had developed a watchful eye and critical ear for underlying sexism, racism, homophobia, and/or classism in people's statements or humor, and I felt that it was my duty to challenge these things. This was a stark difference from my unassertive, pre-grad school self, who shied away from any form of confrontation.

For my mother, these changes became apparent right away, and she was watching me change in ways she did not expect. I would challenge the things that my family said or the jokes that they made by pointing out how they were unintentionally hurtful to some group of people. To her, everyone was joking around and interacting with me in the way that we always had. To me, I was realizing how many parts of my life and culture that I had never taken a critical eye to. So, as I continued through my program the tension grew and I continued to feel distanced from my family. It seemed like I did not fit in like I used to.

The tension peaked in the first semester of my first year of teaching. My mother

and I were on the phone and disagreeing over something. Although my mom and I have both tried to recall, neither of us can remember what we were arguing about. I was pushing back on something she said, and I felt strongly about it, but all I can remember are those twelve powerful words. She said, “Maybe you think you’re better than us because you went to college.” I stopped. The conversation fell silent, and I said, “Okay.” The conversation ended shortly after, and as soon as I hung up I cried. My education that seemed like the ultimate achievement for myself had put a wedge between my family and myself. I knew she did not mean it—not in the way I interpreted it—but it still hurt just as bad.

Every time I revisit the story in my mind, I get emotional. I had worked so hard to make my family proud and to do the right thing. I went to college—check. I went to grad school—check. I started a career—check. I was supporting myself—check. Certainly these are the stepping-stones to a happy and successful adulthood. My upbringing, my school, my social group, television shows and movies all told me these were the steps I needed to take to achieve this ideal status as an educated and successful adult. But why didn’t anyone tell me about the fact that I would change, and my family might not recognize me the same, and that I would identify myself differently?

Fortunately, being a part of the KSTF community provided me with a space to begin to process these emotions. Reading *Why School?* by Mike Rose (2014) and discussing the book’s themes and my own experience with other Fellows helped me feel like I belong in this community. Going to school was my choice, and I am thankful that I had so much love and support to get me there. Because of who I am and where I came from, my path to college was not full of too many obstacles. Despite being a first generation college student, I am still a white female from a middle-class family. The demographic that I fall under still aligns closely with what our society portrays as a college attendee.

However, this brings me to my biggest concern and the conversation I want to start. What about our first generation students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds? If I struggled and continue to struggle with issues of identity and belonging in the academic world while coming from a culture where college was the norm, how deep are these struggles for our students who do not come from this same supportive culture? I have a student who comes from a family where every member works to help run their family store, and the expectation is that she will continue this tradition when she graduates. I have another student (and

several like him) with a father in jail and family members in gangs. Each of my students is living in a community with poverty, gang violence, prostitution, and drug abuse. How can they possibly feel as though they belong in the academic world when they and the people they love live in a starkly different world?

As teachers, it is almost second nature for us to encourage our students to go to college—to chase the American Dream. But, do we take the time to at least acknowledge that this achievement comes with other transformations—that for some students we are encouraging them to depart from the world that they know and feel they belong in? Is there a place for

this conversation in high school? Are our students already thinking about it?

I decided to ask my students. For context, I teach at a public school in the area my students refer to as South Central Los Angeles. Our population is 85% Latino and 15% African American, with 77% of our students eligible for free and reduced lunch. I provided my senior students with a survey about their families' and friends' reactions to their plans for after high school. Almost every student reported that their family and friends were both excited and supportive with the exception of one student whose parents were disappointed that he had chosen community college over the California State Universities he had been accepted to.

The most interesting responses were to the question: "What (if any) were some of the concerns that you considered when deciding to go to college?" I provided a list of things for students to select and directed students to choose all of them that applied. I found that at least one fifth of my students considered how college might cause their friends and family to see them differently. Although these numbers are small, they do show that these concerns are present for some students, which leads me to believe that this is a conversation worth having as educators.

Within the high school setting there are some ways that we can support students in defining their identity and cultivating a sense of belonging in the academic world. At my school, we have implemented an advisory program where each teacher has a grade level advisory of approximately 25 students. Students have the same advisory group and teacher for all four years of their high school career. In this space, we focus on community building and college and career support. As students progress through high school, advisors support students with things like writing their personal statements, filling out college applications, and completing FAFSA (Federal Student Aid Application) and scholarship applications. Additionally, advisors make connections with students' families to involve them as much as possible in the student's education and choices for after high school.

With this advisory program, we can ensure that every senior has at least one adult in their life who they can reach out to for support in navigating the post high school world.

Another option to support our first generation college students could be to start a mentoring program between recent first generation college graduates and high school students coming from the same community. Within a program like this, students could connect with a college graduate who may not be much older than them and discuss some of the challenges of transitioning to college. Perhaps a program like this could begin to help students feel as though they belong. Additionally, it could be helpful to have a community of people sharing the same experience to help one another process the many emotions that occur during such a life changing journey.

Becoming educated is empowering and one of the most beautiful processes a person can delve into. Becoming the first person in your family to graduate from college is a major accomplishment and can boost your self confidence in unexpected ways. However, becoming educated means changing and it can mean changing one's identity—not changing, to become a different person, but changing in the way that growth changes a person. Additionally, it can be difficult at times to believe that one belongs in academia. My experience has taught me that these transformations are impactful and emotional. As my identity has changed, I have experienced a feeling of distance from who I once was and the categories I used to fall under. After speaking with my students, I can see that many of them may experience the same struggles that I have and could benefit from having support in this area. I hope that we, as educators, can work together to support our students as they process the development of their identities and embark upon the path to college. We are the ones who have the ability to teach first generation college students that they do belong in the academic world and I believe it is our duty to do.

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