

“I Was a First-Generation College Student”
First Generation Symposium
March 26, 2021

I want to thank Dr. Indira Petoskey and her staff in the Office of Continuing Studies and Enhanced Learning for hosting today’s symposium. I especially want to thank Sociology Professor Nicholas Simon for his advocacy and support of first-generation students at Eastern. He did his Ph.D. dissertation at UCONN on first-generation students on our campus. Dr. Simon reminds me that we should be talking about the assets and talents of first-generation students, not the skills or experiences they may not have. The key point here is that every student watching today belongs at college—you earned the right to be here, and we are committed to your success and graduation.

I welcome all of the students watching. We have invited students from all 17 institutions in the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities System. And while we want to focus on how we can bring more equitable outcomes to first-generation students, we have invited all students to this all-day conference. This event, which includes sessions throughout the day, is intended to help you learn more about the resources available on our campuses to help students succeed.

I suspect you know what it means to be a “first-generation” college student. To reiterate, it means that your parents did not attend college, nor did their parents. At Eastern, first-generation students make up more than 30 percent of our undergraduate population, which is right around the national average.

Being a first-generation student, however, is more than being a statistic. It means overcoming obstacles you may not even know about. It means not having someone in your family who has already gone through the challenges you are going through.

At Eastern, we believe that every student who is ready for college and wants to complete their degree should be able to do so. We also believe that students who have not had some of the privileges, experiences, and supports of other students may need additional resources to succeed. And most importantly, we believe in you. We know you have the talent and the determination to succeed. We are here to make that happen.

I am going to talk more about some of the resources we have available to you, and also will give you some tips and ideas on how to navigate college. But first, I want to tell you about some other first-generation students and their experiences. You are hardly alone. And when you hear of how others have travelled the path you are on—with great success—I hope it inspires you to work even harder.

First of all . . . **you are looking at a first-generation college student!** I was born in the western hills of Puerto Rico and neither of my parents had more than an 8th-grade education. But they both worked hard. When I was eight, my father moved us to the United States—to Newark,

New Jersey. He and my mother worked in an air conditioning factory, and my Dad became a foreman. When we arrived in the United States, none of us could read, write or speak English.

I learned to read English by looking at the sports pages in the newspaper. There was no bilingual education in the 1950s. My first year in school was a disaster — the teacher didn't know what to do with me and put me in a corner with a boy named Darryl. I suspect he had a learning disability, and all he did all day, every day, was draw. He was good at drawing horses . . . I just doodled and tried to write the alphabet. I received no instruction at all that year!

My family was the only Puerto Rican family in our housing project at the time, and we kept to ourselves. My Dad worked so hard, and did without so that he could send me and my brothers to Catholic schools.

I want to tell you a story about my experience as a high school senior, because it illustrates what happens when you have no one in your family with experience going to college. Of course, going to college starts with applying to college. I remember the day in homeroom when I noticed another girl — her name was Susan — looking at college catalogs and filling out applications. I said to her, "What are you doing?" She told me she was applying to college, and I told her, "you don't have to do that. They just will come here to school and take you." To this day, I don't know where I came up with that idea, but of course, no one in my family would have told me differently. The girl said, "Elsa, you have to apply! Go to the library and look at some of the college catalogs."

I did exactly that and fell in love with a beautiful school in . . . Vermont. Middlebury College. I suspect you have heard of it. It is a very fine liberal arts college with a great history. I asked the librarian if I could get there by bus, and she said yes. That was important, as my father had said I needed to stick to applying to schools that I could get to by bus. Of course, no one told me it was a 5-6 hour bus ride from Newark. But I applied anyway.

I also applied to Rutgers and to a local state school, Montclair State College. In those days, all the schools sent letters to your house and to the principal's office letting you know if you got accepted — all on the same day. I remember the day I got my letters — my brother stayed home to receive the mail and when I called home he said, "Elsa, you made it!"

I had been accepted at all three schools I had applied to. I remember how happy my family was. Getting accepted to college is a big deal for anyone, I don't care what they tell you. But for me—as I bet was the case for you—being the first in your family to go to college was a HUGE deal. I felt vindicated, validated, valued.

And then I went to school the next day. I was asked to go the principal's office — "Mother Superior." I think we all have the same feeling when we get called to the principal's office — fear! I went to see Mother Superior, and the first thing she said to me was, "Who do you know?"

I had no idea what she was talking about. As she talked, I realized she was asking about being accepted to Middlebury College. It was a prestigious school then, and it still is. She basically was saying that the only way I could have gotten into Middlebury was if my family knew someone—if we had “connections.” We didn’t know ANYONE at Middlebury. We knew no one who was an alumnus. We didn’t know that many people in Newark. We didn’t “know” anybody with connections or with power!

I tell you this story for two reasons. One is to remind us of the prejudice and bigotry that people of color have faced in this country for centuries — Mother Superior couldn’t accept the fact I may have earned entrance into such a school as Middlebury. But I did earn it, and that is my second point to you. You deserve to be here at Eastern. You deserve to graduate. You deserve the opportunity to have a successful career. Let no one be allowed to diminish you and your talents — never.

I didn’t end up going to Middlebury, due to the distance, and I ended up enrolling at Montclair State College near where we lived. Let me tell you one more story about my freshman year there. It was time for orientation, when we would all come to campus, stand in line in the gym, and learn all the things we needed to buy or do to start classes.

My mom was so excited! She wanted me to look my best, so we went to the clothing store together. She bought me a blue, two-piece suit with a flowered scarf attached, patent shoes, and a black leather purse. The day came, I dressed up, and took the bus to Montclair.

As soon as I arrived and entered the gym, I knew I was in trouble. It seems like students today have a more informal clothing style, or at least more variations on what you wear. Back then, there was a clear if unwritten dress code; I just didn’t know what it was. The other girls were wearing pleated skirts, white blouses and sweaters, little gold pins with their initials, knee socks, and loafers.

I felt so embarrassed. And the upperclassman who was my guide ditched me as soon as he could. I took the bus home crying, heartbroken. My dream of going to college had ended before it could begin. How could I ever go back to that place? I got home and my family was so excited — “how did it go?” “Did you meet any new friends?” “Tell us about your day.” “You look so beautiful!” “We are so proud of you!”

I realized then that I was not just going to college just to fulfill my own dreams. I was going there for my entire family. I could not let them down. I was going to do whatever it took to succeed.

I could tell you many more stories about going to college — about Montclair, about going on to graduate school, and finally getting my Ph.D. I am guessing you have some interesting stories to tell as well! The point I am trying to make is that being a first-generation student has its ups and downs. I had to learn how to apply for college. I learned the hard way what the dress code

was. But I persevered. I had lots of support from my family, from my professors, and many others along the way.

It would not surprise me if one of you goes on to become a college professor, as I did, or even a college administrator. But there are other successes you can have, and they all can start here at Eastern. Let me share a few examples of other first-generation students who graduated from Eastern and are having great success in their careers. Those of you listening from other colleges in Connecticut have similar success stories on your campuses.

Federica came to the United States from Argentina in 2001 at age 10, a month after 9/11. Despite having to learn English from scratch, she helped her single mother raise her two younger brothers while navigating the challenges of inner-city Hartford. In 2008, Federica graduated from Hartford Public High School and was accepted into Eastern. She lived on campus, worked in my office and was a campus leader. She studied hard. Today, after getting her master's degree in counseling at Providence College in Rhode Island, Federica now works at Stanford University in California.

Kevin grew up in Norwich, Connecticut. His mother was a drug addict and he eventually had to petition for independency. A teenager without a home! Kevin enrolled at Eastern, became a leader in the statewide social work student organization, and graduated in 2007. Today, after getting his

Evelyn graduated a year ago and was a DACA student from North Carolina, supported by a national foundation for Dreamers. She worked as a volunteer at Windham Hospital, participated in an internship at Harvard University's Medical School, and was one of Connecticut's top 12 scholars last year. Evelyn is now at Stanford University as a full-time research professional in their School of Medicine.

Who are some other first-generation college students, people you might recognize? Did you know **Michele Obama** was a first-generation college student? So was **Sonia Sotomayor**, who is a member of the U.S. Supreme Court. The actor **Samuel Jackson** was a first-generation college student, as was the actress **Viola Davis**. So was **Colin Powell**, former Secretary of State, and our new U.S. Secretary of Education, **Miguel Cardona**, who is from Meriden, right here in Connecticut.

How do you join this list of Eastern alumni, as well these celebrities, who are proud first-generation college students? I know you are committed to succeed, and you have the talent to do so. But I also want you to be humble. All of us need the help of others at some point in our lives.

Going it alone is not brave. Having the courage to ask for help — that is what I want you to do. I am sure you know about the Academic Success Center in the library. It is for all students. I know of some of our top math majors who need help with their writing, and outstanding English majors who need help with their physics homework. Don't wait until you are having

difficulty. Make it a habit of going to the ASC center; your studies will only improve. By the way, I believe all our state colleges and universities have similar success centers, so this is not just a resource at Eastern.

If you are eligible for work-study, I hope you find a job on campus. Our faculty and staff will help you learn not only the tasks associated with your on-campus job, but will also help you with the other aspects of professionalism — how to dress, how to act, how to come to work on time.

Another important thing I hope you are doing is making friends outside of your own circles. We have clubs to support students of color — OLAS, the African Club, MALES — and other organizations that allow you to feel comfortable being with people you are familiar with. Similar clubs exist at other schools.

I know that you have your social circles and groups, and it is likely that you are most comfortable with students who share your background. I support those opportunities. But please, get out of your comfort zones. Learn about other cultures. That is what makes our colleges and universities strong — and it will make you stronger.

I also want you to have the courage to ask questions, whether you think they are silly or not. Whether it is in your residence hall, in a classroom, or somewhere else on campus, when situations come up that you are unfamiliar with, don't understand, or are even anxious about, don't run away. Don't sit silent. Ask questions, find out what you need to do. We are committed to your success and you need to help us help you by having confidence in yourself.

Finally, some of you may come from neighborhoods where no one has gone to college before you. Your friends back home may resent you. They may make fun of you. Or perhaps your family wants you to stay home to work and help support the family. Never forget—the best gift you can give your family is to get your college education. I am living proof of that fact, as are the other people I have mentioned.

I hope some of the people I have told you about today have inspired you. I hope my own personal stories have reminded you that you can succeed if you work hard and stay focused on your goals. And I hope you take advantage of every resource, every service, and every opportunity you have.

During the rest of today's program, you are going to hear about many of these resources at Eastern—the Writing Center, the Math Center, the Center for Internships and Career Development, and others. You will hear from first-generation alumni, including members of our faculty, as well as from current first-generation students at Eastern. Listen carefully—they have many insights to share.

In closing, let me share that each May, we hold our Commencement Exercises, when our seniors walk across the stage in their caps and gowns to graduate. I get to shake each of those

student's hands as they start the next chapter in their lives. I expect to see you when it's your turn!

When you walk across the stage at graduation, you will be ready for that first job after graduation. More importantly, you will have the skills you need to adapt to the changes that will inevitably take place around you. It is said that 85% of the jobs in 2030 are not here yet. If that sounds hard to believe, remember this—50 years ago, no one but colleges, the military and large companies had computers. 40 years ago, there were no cell phones. 30 years ago, there was no Internet. 20 years ago, there was no social media. You live during exciting, changing times. Work hard, complete your degree, and be ready for that next great adventure.

Have a wonderful day.