

Advice  
Article

# First-Generation Warriors

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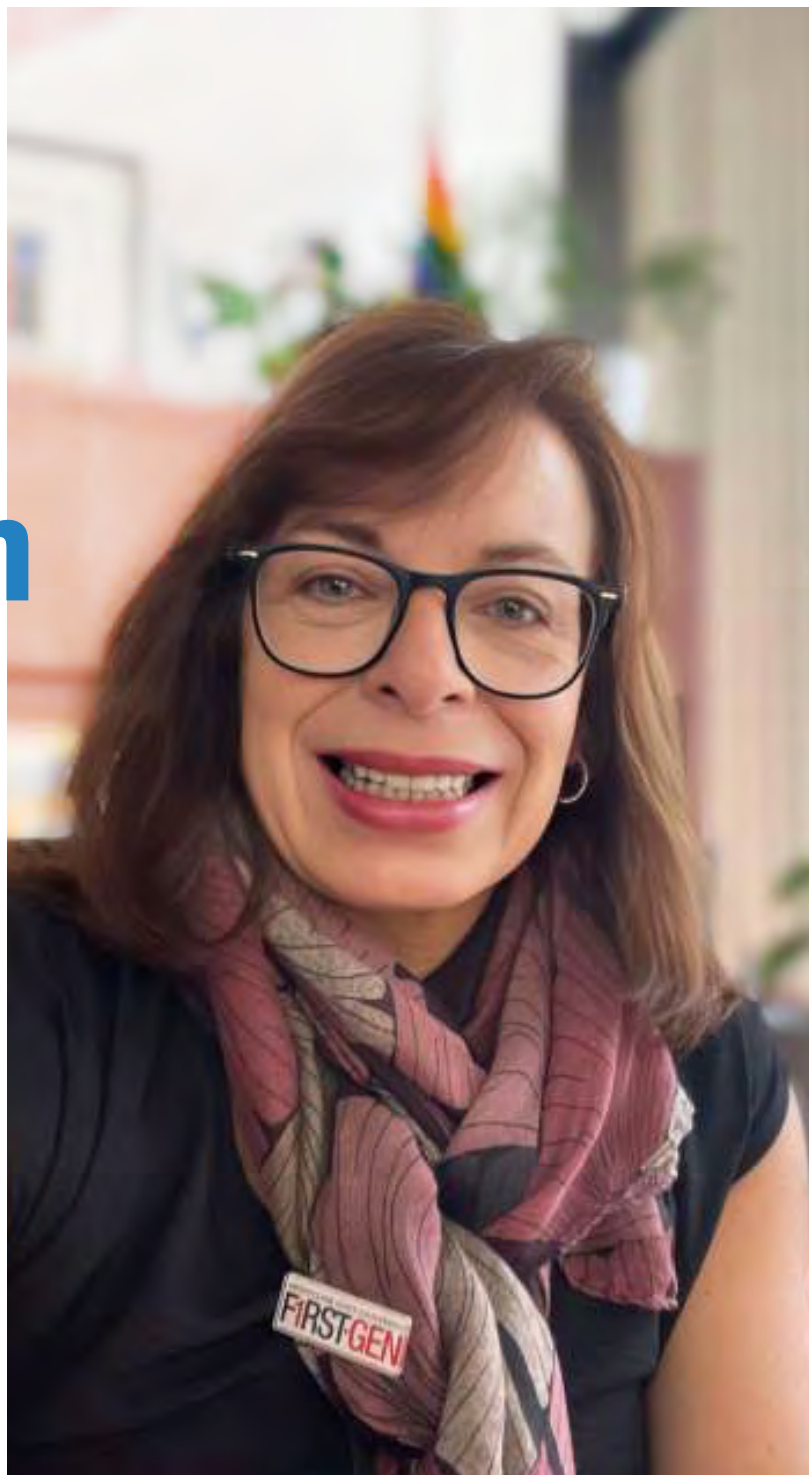
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# First- Generation Warriors

*Dawn Meza Soufleris is vice president for student development and campus life at Montclair State University, in New Jersey. In this personal essay, she reflects on her experiences as a first-generation college student in the SUNY system in upstate New York in the 1980s — what has changed, and what remains the same — and how those experiences shaped her passion for helping today's first-gen students.*

*This essay is part of The Chronicle's series that highlights the challenges facing first-generation students, low-income students, and others. The series is part of the [Different Voices of Student Success](#) project, which is supported by the Ascendium Education Group.*



Watching [first-generation college students](#) successfully navigate a campus environment never ceases to amaze me. While the families of first-gen students are proud of their daughters, sons, siblings, and grandchildren, their pride and love do not often mean they can provide guidance and insight on how to manage the complicated world of higher education.

I say this as a first-generation college warrior who now serves as a senior leader at a large public university where more than half the students identify as first-generation. I use the word “warrior” with intention. What many of us experienced in college at a time when first-gen students were not identified or acknowledged was nothing short of being in battle; resilience, endurance, and courage were necessary attributes that led many of us to succeed, but others had to surrender.

As I reflect on my own experience as the only member of my immediate family to attend and graduate from college (my father obtained his GED after serving in the military, while my mother finished high school and went on to become a hairstylist), I have realized that it is something of a miracle that I graduated at all. My path was strewn with obstacles, from figuring out which college to attend (I chose a public university, based on cost), to completing the financial-aid form (which took me days to fill out with no help from my parents), to ultimately being dropped off alone on a campus of 12,000 students (my parents did not participate in any orientation sessions because there were none for families at that time). To say I was overwhelmed would be an understatement.

Those four years were a series of guesses, mistakes, and challenges that often

led me to wonder, “Do I belong here?” I had no one to ask whether I should just give up, go home, and find a job in my hometown. Terms like “first-generation” were not used then. While I did meet other students whose parents, like mine, lacked a formal education, there were no support offices, groups, or even literature about what it meant to be the first in your family to attend college. It was uncharted territory, where terms like “inclusion,” “belonging,” “student success,” “intrusive advising,” and “academic intervention” were not in the vernacular.

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Since there were no cellphones back then, my calls home were once a week, after 9 p.m. (in order to save on long-distance charges), and consisted of little but a “How are you? We miss you. Are you eating?” — which at the time felt appropriate.



## What placed me on the trajectory toward what is now a 33-year career in student affairs was meeting someone who became a mentor — a term no one used in the 1980s at my university — in a moment I call “the tap.”

I remember calling my parents and sharing what my major was going to be (the university I attended allowed students to be undeclared for their first five semesters, which, in retrospect, did not help a first-gen student like me find focus and purpose). “Yay!” said my father, who truly had no idea what the name of the major really meant.

Funnily enough, I wound up making that same call six more times. Yes, I had seven different majors (not simultaneously), with no guidance from an academic adviser or success coach. (I never met my adviser; I am not sure I even had one!) Changing majors was as easy as filling out a carbon-copy form.

Each time I chose a major, I took a class in that subject, and when I realized that I either had no aptitude for the discipline or truly hated the class, I changed to a different major. Ultimately, my major (which ended up being American history) was selected by default. I had taken more history classes than anything else at the university. The secretary in the registrar’s office — whom I got to know on a first-name basis because I was constantly changing majors — said to me, “What classes have you done well in and liked? That should be your major, honey!” Her advice was as good as any other I had received since arriving at the university, so I went with it and actually graduated on time.

After such a meandering path in college, it could have been just as harrowing to find and pursue a career. Becoming a history teacher seemed expected, but after a stint as a student teacher, I was not convinced that was my calling. What placed me on the trajectory toward what is now a 33-year career in student affairs was meeting someone who became a mentor — a term no one used in the 1980s at my university — in a moment I call “the tap.”

I had applied for and was accepted as a resident assistant, mainly because I was a very socially engaged student and thought it would be terrific to be in charge of a residence-hall floor and get free room and board. One day a staff member reached out to me and spoke about his own career in what was then called “student personnel.” If it had not been for his willingness to reach out, tap me on the shoulder, provide insight on what the career path entailed, and help me apply both for graduate school and for an assistantship (another foreign word to me at that time), I would not be in this role today.

I share this because my own experience as an undergraduate has shaped not only my passion for students but also a special calling for those who are the first in their families to attend college. It’s a personal and professional joy to know that students like me are now



“seen” in higher education. There is language, research, and resources to help first-generation students as they maneuver through the landscape of college and university life. Now more than ever, we acknowledge them, celebrate them, and welcome their families to the table. I can guarantee that if my parents had been invited to family orientation to learn how they could support me as an undergraduate, they would have attended with enthusiasm (and many questions!). If someone had said to me, “It is OK to feel like you don’t belong here — you do! And you are not alone!” (a feeling we now call “impostor syndrome”), my hours of angst

wondering what in the world I was doing in college might have been fewer. I am forever grateful to my mentor for making such a difference at a time when I was lost.

Have we solved all the issues first-generation students face? Unfortunately, no. Many first-gen students encounter a host of internal and external variables that affect their ability to succeed in college, including familial and financial constraints, social challenges, and academic roadblocks. Impostor syndrome still exists. But what has changed since the 1980s is that first-gen students are recognized, offered support, and acknowledged as important members of

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our campus communities. Our role as staff and as faculty members is to understand their challenges, celebrate their successes, and reach out when we see a student struggling to find a path — “the tap.”

Most days during the academic year I proudly wear my “FIRST GEN” pin on campus. I want students to know that they are not alone and that many of us, at all levels on campus, share a bond — that we, too, were the first in our families to attend college and earn a degree. I am thrilled when students see my pin and say, “You were a first-gen student? No way!” Because it gives me an opportunity to tell my story and let them know that the tenacity and grit first-generation students bring to campus is what will ensure they graduate and succeed.

I laugh with my first-gen students when I share that, yes, I still have student loans (doctoral degrees are not often free), and that my 84-year-old father still does not understand what I do for a living. He often tells his friends that I am president of a big-time university, even though I’ve told him I am a vice president and what my job entails.

Those conversations with students usually result in a hug or a handshake and a return visit. During those moments, I emphasize how critical it is to remember where they have come from. I also urge them to pay it forward, especially when their personal stories can empower others. In other words, tap someone in the future on the shoulder and say, “I believe in you!” The self-confidence and encouragement first-generation college warriors can foster in others can be pivotal moments that struggling students may need as they continue on their personal and professional journey in higher education.



*“First-Generation Warriors” was produced by Chronicle Intelligence with support from the Ascendium Education Group. Please contact [CI@chronicle.com](mailto:CI@chronicle.com) with questions or comments.*

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