COMMENTARY

Reflections of A First Generation Student, American, and Academician

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The Higher Education Act of 1965 and 1998 defined a first generation college student as ‘a student both of whose parents did not complete a bachelor’s degree, or in the case of students who live with and are supported by only one parent, a student whose only such parent did not complete a bachelor’s degree.’\textsuperscript{1} As of 2016, of the 7.3 million undergraduates attending four-year public and private colleges and universities about 24\% are estimated to be first-generation college students (FGCS).\textsuperscript{2} The majority of FGCS are white (46\%) followed by Hispanic or Latin (25\%), and then Black or African American (18\%) and Asian (6\%). Fifty percent of FGCS are estimated to be from low income families with median parental income of dependent students estimated to be approximately $41,000. Discussions centered on FGCS and their hardships and successes have become commonplace on most college campuses. Most every academic institution has also begun maintaining analytics on this group.

I quite honestly never gave much deliberate thought to my status as a first-generation student while in pharmacy school. My parents did not speak much English, and Italian was my first language. Both immigrated to the US in the 1960s, more specifically 1963 or as my mom still refers to it “the year President Kennedy was shot.” Neither of my parents progressed beyond the fifth grade, meaning they hardly had a grasp of even their native language. As I sit through academic meetings and conferences where this topic is discussed, I often begin to think about my experiences and how my status as a first generation American and college student shaped my time in pharmacy school and now as a faculty member and administrator.

Growing up in an immigrant household was complicated and arduous. For as long as I can remember both my parents left the house for work six days a week before the sun came up. My father also regularly accepted masonry side jobs to raise extra money. Their early mornings became my early mornings. Being appropriately dressed and fed meant getting up as early as they did. Sleeping in was rarely an option. Since both parents worked until at least 4PM, my afternoon latch key ritual from the age of 9 involved me using my own house key, figuring out my own homework, and fixing my own snack. While Italian was my first language, English came quickly as most new languages do to young children. I grew up without a home computer of any kind or even a microwave. Our stereo was probably the most high-tech piece of equipment in our home. Only recently did I purchase a smart phone for my parents, and they are still laboring to completely understand how it works. I always recognized that I was somehow dissimilar from my peers but unlike many other children of immigrants there was no obvious physical way to differentiate me. But there were other markers. I remember having “European sandals” at a time way before they were fashionable, and a typical lunch was an over-sized mortadella sandwich on Italian Bread. I did not experience my first peanut butter and jelly sandwich or even a s’more until I was a pharmacy resident. I suffered from what in hindsight was probably an early form of impostor syndrome or at least some condition of developing two identities one for home and one for school. In academic settings, I was always wondering if I had done enough to fit in for being exposed as a fraud. Trying to fit in often meant trying not to be noticed or at least not noticed as different. This maneuvering can require a great deal of energy that might otherwise be used on more productive tasks directly related to scholastic success. Also, with more recent recognition of wellness as an issue for today’s college students one must consider the potential added stress and stressors that are faced by first generation students who are attempting to navigate the uniqueness of both their upbringing as well as life on campus.\textsuperscript{3}

My parents were industrious and prudent with their resources, only ever opening credit cards when they were well into their fifties and it became all but necessary to purchase certain things including airline tickets. We certainly never went without any necessities but despite their best efforts there was a constant fear of not having enough or of some eminent
threat (eg, an injury on the job, a downturn in the economy, a lay-off). While these fears can reside in the minds of just about any family, they are likely incrementally more tangible among immigrant families who rely on the consistent availability of blue-collar jobs to make ends meet and the prospects of navigating unemployment with a poor grasp of English is extremely daunting. To immigrants’ perceptions of a safety net and other protections are that more fragile and less likely to be taken for granted. The College application process was particularly daunting in terms of navigating and understanding admissions requirements, selecting schools with affordable tuition rates, and sorting through financial aid. My parents were not able to provide much assistance in this regard. In fact, in an odd retrograde way, I typically had to wade through the information and then explain it to my parents. While I attended a private, catholic college preparatory high school that provided some assistance, the constant fear of appearing overly ignorant sometimes imposed a barrier to asking for more help. There were other steep challenges involving room and board and opening a checking count.

The first-generation experience also came with some advantages. My parents understood the value of education and imparted it upon me from as long as I could remember. Working blue-collar jobs for eight plus hours a day, often 6 days a week ingrained in my parents the value-added proposition of a college education. I never considered the prospect of not going to college. It was a non-option as far as my parents were concerned. As education and schooling was so valued by my family so too were the conduits of that commodity – teachers. My parents insisted upon respect for teachers. Even when teachers were wrong, they were right. It was fruitless to blame an instructor for a poor grade or an unfair assignment or a perception of biased treatment in the classroom. I also watched my parents struggle with seemingly simple activities of normal life that are for most afterthoughts like visiting the department of motor vehicles, filling out job applications, or doctor visits. I learned at a very early age to decipher medical billing notices, insurance letters, and other official correspondences that my parents could not easily interpret. Through all this my parents were driven and determined. They persisted and from them I gained grit.

When I was considering the decision to attend pharmacy school my parents were particularly supportive. They were raised in a small farming village in Southern Italy with limited local access to medical care. The pharmacist within the village was a revered and essential professional who functioned as a therapist, compounder, dispenser and sometimes prescriber. The pharmacist also stocked and sold various chemicals and potions used in processing, preserving, and curing meats and in making cheeses. The pharmacist was highly regarded, and it was easy for my parents and family to understand why I decided to become a pharmacist and to support me in all aspects of that endeavor. Explaining my decision to pursue residency training after my pharmacy degree, however, was met with confusion not unlike that encountered by most students choosing this path who are FGCS or otherwise. Even more confusing was the prospect of electing to complete residency training at a distance that typically requires air travel. First generation students are likely to come from families that are accustomed to high levels of interdependence which relies on the proximity of the nuclear family. Guilt may come from physically distancing themselves from their core family and the prospects of then potentially being accused of abandonment. Students may feel real or perceived pressure to remain physically bound to their nuclear family. This has been termed by many as ‘break away guilt’ and can place significant stress on students that must now cast ever wider nets in terms of residencies and residency locations. These factors can influence a student’s decision to pursue residency training as well as influence the location of programs they consider. Additionally, and inter-related to success, students may feel guilt associated with experiencing upward mobility in terms of societal status.

In reflecting upon the manner and environment of my up-bringing, I could not help but think if it has impacted how I learned and now how I function as a faculty member and administrator. I wonder why the thought of “counting” or considering first-generation students was a non-issue in the 1980s and 1990s and was that appropriate? Additionally, I wonder about the experiences of a first-generation student in 2020. I would think that the internet boom and social media age has made things both easier and simultaneously more difficult for immigrants in general. Both the volume of information available and the rapidity of access to that data is remarkable and potentially imposing. The wealth of information is only of value if it can be accessed and access requires both possession of technological devices and the savviness to operate and navigate them.

I had never really considered if anyone would really be interested in my status as a first-generation student and American. Most would probably never guess that I was the child of immigrants, but it does make for a fun fact during ‘ice breaker’ games. Many colleges and schools have begun to proactively identify faculty and administrators that are first generation students and make them and their stories available to those who are seeking similar mentors and/or role-models. First-generation students may experience unique challenges in both applying to and completing pharmacy school. These trials can be compounded by the current nature of pharmacy as a profession and by the rigors of pharmacy curricula and training. Given the circumstances of many first-generation students the prospects of failure are likely more significant and
the pressure to succeed more daunting. Interestingly, the Associations curriculum quality surveys do not track first generation status of either students or faculty. It may be prudent for the Academy to pay more attention to first generation students and their experiences within our institutions. Recognizing the power of personal narratives, it may also be logical for more faculty within our Academy who are first generation students and/or Americans to share their stories.

REFERENCES