

Adapting to college life is not always easy for first-generation students

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Smith College junior Audrey Olmos-Govea is the first in her family to go to college. Photo: Arianna Skibell/The Hechinger Report/TNS

NORTHAMPTON, Mass. — Audrey Olmos-Govea remembers sitting in class at Smith College and not believing what she had just heard. The teacher turned to the students and said, “You’ve all been to Europe, right?”

Most of her classmates agreed, which made Olmos-Govea feel like she did not belong. She is the first one in her family to attend college, and the family lives on the \$15,000 that her mother earns. Olmos-Govea, who is from Pomona, California, had flown only once in her life. For her, a trip to Europe is out of the question.

“I haven’t been to Europe,” she told the class. “My family didn’t take vacations. I worked every summer.”

The teacher turned red and apologized, and Olmos-Govea felt embarrassed. “But after the fact, I knew it was the right thing to do,” she said.

Overcoming Obstacles And Odds

Olmos-Govea, who is Mexican-American, overcame tremendous odds just to attend Smith. Now in her third year, she came from a town where nearly 4 out of 10 people over age 25 did not graduate from high school. The majority of them do not speak English at home. Smith is a top all-women college that costs \$63,950 each year, not including books. Olmos-Govea is only able to attend because the school is helping her cover the cost with financial aid and scholarships.

In recent years, a growing number of top small schools are trying to get first-generation Americans to attend college and do well. Nationally, just 3 out of 10 students whose parents are poor and born in other countries will graduate within six years, according to the Pell Institute. The organization does research to encourage first-generation students to go to college. Usually, it is supposed to take four years to graduate. The poorest students, like Olmos-Govea, have only a 1 in 10 chance of graduating in six years.

At Smith, about 1 in 5 of this year's freshmen are first-generation students. Five years ago, the college began a program that encourages those students to connect and learn about the school before classes begin.

College President Understands

Many of these small colleges understand the challenges that keep first-generation students from graduating. The schools are expensive. Students may not be prepared for the difficult classes. They might also be afraid to ask for help.

"Last year I was talking to a student who was homesick. I started talking to her like I would any other homesick student," said Marge Litchford, a top official at Smith, who started the program for first-generation students. "But then I realized she wasn't going to see her parents for the whole year because she couldn't afford to fly home."

Not long ago, about a dozen new Smith students listened to a talk given by Smith President Kathleen McCartney. The first in her family to go to college, McCartney said a high school counselor discouraged her from applying to a good college, but she applied anyway to another top school near her home.

She described the struggle of living at home and working part time while taking classes. After her talk, she tweeted a photo of the group. The students decided to call it "Hanging with my people @smithcollege #FirstGenSmithies."

New Programs Help First-Gen Students

Angel Perez is an official at Trinity College in Connecticut. He said that schools help first-generation students more now than when he graduated in 1998.

Perez said that when he went to college, he would not have told many people that he was the first in his family to do so. "I'm just so shocked that students are willing to talk about it so freely," he said.

There are not many first-generation students at the best colleges and universities, a study by the University of Michigan found.

However, some small private colleges are trying to change that. They are making an effort to enroll and keep first-generation students, and are reporting some success. At Smith, nearly 9 out of 10 first-generation students graduate within four years. The special program for first-generation students is aimed at giving them confidence and the feeling that they belong.

Gaining Confidence

Richard D. Kahlenberg is with The Century Foundation, a group that promotes equal opportunity for students to go to college. He said the country will be stronger if more leaders know what it is like to grow up in a family where the parents have not gone to college.

As a new student, Olmos-Govea did not feel very comfortable. Now she is full of confidence.

"Being here," Olmos-Govea said, "has taught me how to handle myself in those situations. It hasn't made me any less scared. But Smith has taught me to question."

Evidence-based discussion question:

Read this article about college recruiters at low-income schools (<https://newsela.com/articles/college-recruiters/id/2314/>). What are the main challenges faced by low-income students in the college process? In your opinion, what more could be done to support these students? Use evidence from both articles to support your answer.

Direct link to paired article: <https://newsela.com/articles/college-recruiters/id/2314/>

Quiz

- 1 Which statement BEST describes Olmos-Govea's perspective as a first-generation college student?
- (A) As a first-generation student, she fears that she might never fit in at her college.
 - (B) Being a first-generation student is easy compared to many of the experiences in her life.
 - (C) Though she sometimes feels uncomfortable, she knows she can handle the challenges.
 - (D) Being a first-generation student is the biggest challenge that a college student can face.
- 2 Read the section "New Programs Help First-Gen Students." What is one way colleges are encouraging first-generation students to attend their schools?
- (A) They are reducing the cost of college for all students, including first-generation students.
 - (B) They are offering programs that allow first-generation students to try out a college before enrolling.
 - (C) They are matching up first-generation students with other students to make them feel more comfortable.
 - (D) They are offering programs that are meant to build a sense of belonging for first-generation students.
- 3 Which of the following sentences develops the idea that some first-generation students have overcome major challenges to attend college?
- (A) Now in her third year, she came from a town where nearly 4 out of 10 people over age 25 did not graduate from high school.
 - (B) In recent years, a growing number of top small schools are trying to get first-generation Americans to attend college and do well.
 - (C) Five years ago, the college began a program that encourages those students to connect and learn about the school before classes begin.
 - (D) At Smith, nearly 9 out of 10 first-generation students graduate within four years.

- 4 Why does the author include the information about Angel Perez in the section "New Programs Help First-Gen Students"?
- (A) to show that first-generation students in college is not a new thing
 - (B) to show that there are more first-generation students than people realize
 - (C) to that first-generation students are shocked by many parts of college
 - (D) to show that the experience of first-generation students may be changing