



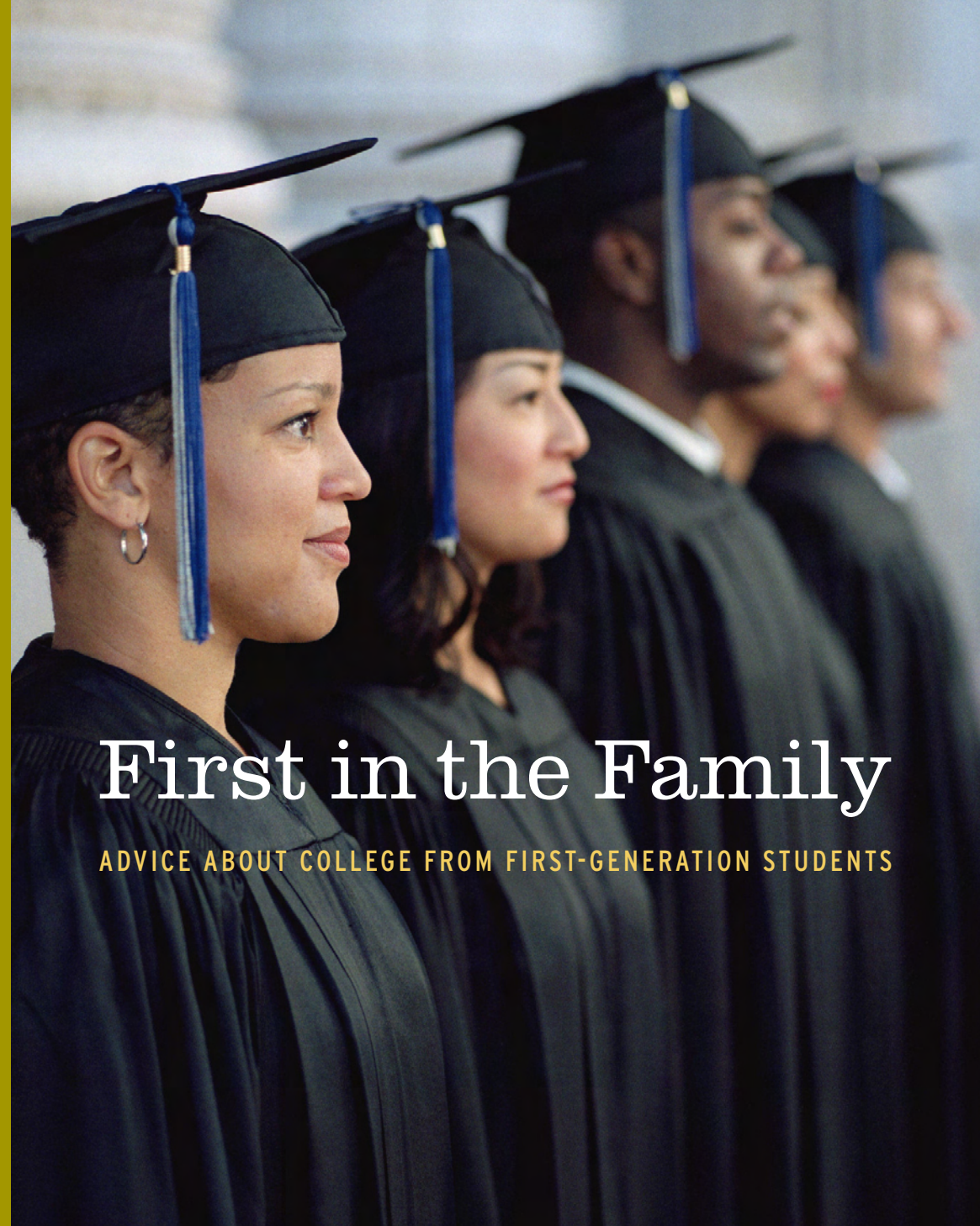
"Being a first-generation student means that you are in uncharted territory. There's no one who's gone before you, that you are close to, that can tell you all the ins and outs, give you all the ups and downs. You are on your own; you're going to have to learn on your own." - DEBRA

"I never really thought about asking, 'Hey, what's the work going to be like? What's the class atmosphere like?' I assumed that I would know what to do once I got there."
- HAZEL

First in the Family: Your College Years is a unique advice guide that presents the voices of sixteen real students who are the first in their families to go to college. Packed with useful resources and heartfelt stories, this book is an excellent guide through the key issues—from cultural conflict to academic challenge—facing first-generation students.



NEXT GENERATION PRESS



First in the Family

ADVICE ABOUT COLLEGE FROM FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS

Your College Years

BY KATHLEEN CUSHMAN

Acknowledgments

This volume is the sequel to *First in the Family: Your High School Years* (Next Generation Press, 2005, \$8.95), in which the authors of this book describe how they made their way to college admission, offering practical strategies for others to do the same. The book is available through online booksellers; for orders in quantity, please contact the publisher at info@nextgenerationpress.org.

Copyright © 2006 by Next Generation Press

Next Generation Press
P.O. Box 603252
Providence, RI 02906
www.nextgenerationpress.org

ISBN 0-9762706-6-8

All rights reserved.

For additional copies in quantities of ten or more, please contact Next Generation Press at info@nextgenerationpress.org.

Book design by Sandra Delany.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Generous support for this book came from Lumina Foundation for Education. The opinions expressed here are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent official policies or positions of Lumina Foundation for Education.

Abe Louise Young deserves enormous credit for her help in developing this volume. She arranged student interviews and conducted two of them, and, in the final writing stages, she provided essential editorial guidance. Irina Feygina and Celia Bohannon also contributed significantly to the work of organizing the student voices presented here, and Rosa Fernández helped develop the worksheets and appendixes. Montana Miller gave generously of her expertise throughout the interviewing process. As the book's photography editor, Barbara Cervone brought in images that could reflect the power of these students' experiences.

Next Generation Press owes its greatest thanks to the college students whose insights and advice make up the substance of this book. They came to us with the assistance of the following people and organizations: Dr. Mamta Motwani Accapadi at the University of Texas in Austin; Patty Chong-Delon at City College of San Francisco; Pete Coser at Oklahoma State University; Bjorn Danielson at the Center for Native Education at Antioch University in Seattle; Chris Douse at Indiana/Purdue University at Fort Wayne; Jennifer Frank at the Community College of Denver; John Hilley and Anderson Williams at Community IMPACT in Nashville; Dr. Virginia Jane Rosser at Bowling Green State University in Ohio; Darrick Smith at Oakland Technical Arts High School; Irene Sterling at the Paterson Education Fund; and the Rural Schools and Community Trust.

Contents

INTRODUCTION	vii
1. YOU'RE ON YOUR WAY	
College is a journey of discovery	1
2. FACING THE HURDLES	
College can be a culture shock	10
3. IT'S YOUR TIME	
Take charge of your academic choices	19
4. ENLARGING YOUR CIRCLE	
Make relationships that help you do well	31
5. THE HOURS OF YOUR DAY	
How to manage your time and resources	44
6. READING, WRITING, AND AIMING HIGH	
Your critical college skills can only get better	63
7. GOOD TIMES AND HARD TIMES	
College is a social and emotional experience	72
8. WHO ARE YOU NOW?	
You develop a new identity while at college	87
9. REACHING BACK HOME	
Will your family and friends change, too?	98
10. PASS IT FORWARD	
You'll help those who follow you	113
USEFUL RESOURCES	115
THE STUDENT CONTRIBUTORS	122



Introduction

When you pick up this book, you are finished with high school for good—in fact, it may be already long in your past. You have a new goal now, a harder one: to get yourself through college and earn the degree that can change your life.

You can think in a new way about your learning now. In this mindset, grades and deadlines continue to matter, but your education no longer feels like a race with an end. Instead, it's a continuing journey of discovery.

All during your college years, you will be finding your way to your dream. You'll have hard work to do on this journey: thinking through difficult material, writing well, asking questions that push you further. But you will acquire new tools that help you to do that work, and meet experts who will teach you to use them.

Not just the work but the relationships you forge in college make you stronger, smarter, and wiser. Getting to know other students, you will dig into the challenges of academic learning and increase your understanding of the diverse world that awaits you. Forming ties with your professors, you will discover new fields of study, new ways of thinking about the world.

Your degree will bring many rewards—partly because you can expect to earn more as a college graduate. Its most important rewards, however, come from the qualities you will be developing: independence, initiative, confidence, and self-direction on your path through life.

Whether you attend a private four-year college, a state university, or the local community college, you have much to learn from others who have gone before you. In this book, students like you lend a hand along your college journey. They share their experiences, offer their guidance, and give you some practical tools for getting where you want to go. We hope that their conversation will open up possibilities for you and encourage you when you need it most. Each one of them has learned so much in college—about themselves, and about the larger world. Now it's your turn!



1

You're on your way

College is a journey of discovery

Eric Polk sat in the front seat of the car that was taking him away to college and tried to make sense of the mixed emotions he felt. Behind the wheel was his mentor, John, a community leader who had helped him come the distance from the poorest section of Nashville, Tennessee, to college acceptance at Wake Forest University. A few hours before, Eric had said goodbye to his mother and grandmother, his favorite teacher, his old friends from the neighborhood. He was pulling away from them now, yet at the same time carrying them with him.

He remembered every one of his struggles to become the first in his family to attend college. Yes, he was proud and excited—but why did he feel such a knot in his stomach?

» I started thinking about all the highs and all the lows, and just seeing my life flash by. And it felt like a long journey to freedom. Like, man, I'm leaving everything behind that was challenging me, that didn't want me to be here, or that pushed me or pulled me to get here. It was like, "I'm on my way!" I was anxious, I was nervous, I was excited, I was scared! - ERIC

When you get the news that you are accepted to college, you have every reason to celebrate. You are also striking out into new territory, however, especially if no one in your family has gone before you. Any explorer feels the excitement and the worry that Eric describes, at the beginning of a journey of discovery. In the pages that follow, other students tell how they crossed the bridge into their college years.

Remember why you're going to college.

You already know that your college degree can make a big difference to the life you will lead in the future. You may not have decided what you want to do with your education, but you have plenty of reasons to get it.

Mike Morris came from rural Mississippi and felt deep loyalty to the

aunt who had raised him. He struggled with academics, but Brigham Young University in Utah offered him an athletic scholarship. Mike went off to college far from home, in a place where he often felt like a stranger. Even when a football injury put him on the bench, he kept his eyes on the degree that could lift his family out of poverty.

» I'm in college for them—to better them, give them a chance. As long as I can get my aunt her first house, her first own land, and help my cousin out with her child, I'm happy. - MIKE

Debra Graves worked from the time she was a teenager to support her young sons as a single mother. For her, starting community college near her home in Denver was a chance to have people take her seriously. Through the mayor's office, she received a grant to study in a field that interested her.

» I saw this quote, "God provides food for the birds, but he doesn't throw it in the nest." That, to me, means everything. Dreams are out there waiting for me, but I've got to do the work to make them happen. If I want my children to be successful, I don't leave that in someone else's hands. If I want to do well in school, then I'm the one responsible for it. That's what drives me. - DEBRA

You'll need good guides to help you through.

Like many other students in this book, you might have had help from others as you decided to apply to college and gained your admission. Now you are on your way, but during what lies ahead, you will need even more support.

Aileen Rosario is in college because she wants to be a lawyer. In Paterson, New Jersey, her family struggled with hard times, and her high school counselors discouraged her from college. But her supervisors at a nonprofit education group—who once were first-generation students, too—took her ambition seriously. Aileen has now finished two years at her local community college and is enrolled in a state university. She still works at the same place, and her employers still stand behind her.

» They said, "You could do it, you just have to go to school for it!" That's when I started thinking about the options I had, and I started researching it. I consider them my parents in a way. When I have a problem and I come to them, they understand me and help me fix it. - AILEEN

Such assistance might come from your community or from the people you meet at college. Wherever you find it, that support can help you make important decisions and adjustments throughout the years ahead. Keep your eyes open from the start for the people who reach out to you. They will be your guides through unfamiliar territory.

College is about change and discovery.

As you get to know more about your choices at college, you may start to discover new interests and develop in new directions. You could change your ideas of who you are and what your future might hold. Those close to you might understand and support your new ideas, or maybe you will feel their disapproval.

Stephen Torres grew up, the son of a barber, in a Mexican-American neighborhood near Austin, Texas. An excellent math student in high school, he attended a summer course at the University of Texas that introduced minority students to the field of engineering. When he won a scholarship and began his first year at the university, everybody thought he would go on to be an engineer. But as he became involved in Latino groups on campus, his interests turned to politics.

» I thought, "Wow, this is college, so let me get a little understanding of what it really has to offer." I love engineering, but when I really realized how much my identity and my background meant to me, I changed my major to Mexican-American Studies. I didn't want to sit by myself in an engineering bubble, stuck on that side of campus among the same people. I could do a lot more by working to define policy-making for urban and rural school districts, and things like that. - STEPHEN

When you start college, you bring along not just your own hopes and expectations, but also those of your family and others who care about you. Your former teachers may already picture you on a certain career

path. Your family might expect you to keep helping out in the ways you did before. Your romantic partner may expect to stay together, or you might have children who need your attention.

Perhaps everybody assumes that you will return to your old neighborhood after you finish college. Niema Jordan comes from Oakland, California, and grew up with economic struggle. Her mother works as a security guard and her stepfather drives a bus; neither one went past high school. But Niema has a passion for writing, so she worked hard to get into the journalism school at Northwestern University, outside of Chicago. She might go back to Oakland, but she knows she will not be living in the projects.

» I embrace my life and how I was raised. It's me, it's where I come from, and it has molded my outlook on so many things. But it's not going to be my life as an adult. I know that already. I'm destined for something better.

- NIEMA

College is your time to discover new possibilities, meet new people, test new ideas, develop new skills, and make new connections. The time and energy you put into the next several years will earn you a degree, if you work hard and keep at it. But college can also help you grow and learn in ways you cannot yet imagine.

» In high school I saw college as something you do so that you can move on.

All you've got to do is get this degree—this piece of paper—and get a good job and make some money and have a family and do great things with your life, if you want to. And there's so much more. - STEPHEN

During his years at college, Stephen began thinking deeply about his Latino identity and his values. He shaped his studies, and his future, around his beliefs about politics and community. For him, the purpose of college was no longer simply to rise in the world—it was to change the world.

Your background gives you extra strengths.

You may feel uncertain about where you fit in at college, especially if most of the other students have more economic privilege. When she arrived at Northwestern, Niema saw many contrasts between herself and

her classmates. But as her first year went on, she also started to see the positive edge that her tough Oakland upbringing gave her.

She knew how to handle herself in a city like Chicago, whereas a lot of her classmates had no clue. In her journalism class, she could get stories that others were afraid to go near—interviews with people living in housing projects or on the streets. And she could live on very little money.

» Most college students don't have enough money to go out and do whatever it is they want to do. And if you come from a background where there's been penny pinching, you know how to handle that. The struggles we've gone through have prepared me for my life as a college student, and also prepared me for my future career. In some ways it gives me a bonus.

- NIEMA

Not only that, but her own experiences could educate and enlighten others, Niema realized. She had fought an uphill battle to get to college—and that gave her plenty of muscle. Her fellow students saw that and they often came to her for advice.

» People in college have breakdowns—it happens. And a lot of times they'll come to you for help, because they see that strength that you built up through whatever difficult and chaotic struggles you had. They're like, "Wow, how are you so strong?" - NIEMA

As a minority student who came from a rough part of Cleveland, Raja Fattah knew that he stood out on the largely white campus of Kent State University in Ohio. But he saw that as an advantage, especially with his major in justice studies.

» In our country right now, it gives you an edge automatically, because our country is not just white Anglo-Saxon Americans like in the 1800s! It's diversified. I'm Palestinian, so I had a foundation set for Arabic. - RAJA

Raja decided to make the most of his family's native language by taking more courses in Arabic language. Combining that with a degree in justice studies, he would stand a better chance of achieving his dream, to work for the F.B.I.

You can build your education—not just receive it.

Like Raja, you won't be sitting back passively to take what others arrange for you in the next four years. You had to push hard to get where you are. Now you can use what you know about life to stand up for yourself, shape your own education, and take what you need from college.

» Middle-class Americans who are college-educated have all this power. But even though people are in college, they're ignorant to a lot of things. They don't know where I've come from—there are people here who never heard of Oakland, who went to public schools that were the greatest things on earth. So why should they make choices for me? Going to college, you have access. You can tell people what's going on. - NIEMA

Even though Stephen grew up only a few miles from the University of Texas, when he arrived on campus as a first-year student, it did not feel like home to him. At first, he felt like a second-class citizen there.

» White students, with parents who came to this university, expect to be listened to. Whether their work merits that respect or that attention, they expect it—and generally what you expect out of life, you're going to get. Your circumstances are going to affect your life. Let's not pretend like they don't. - STEPHEN

Then Stephen began to form connections with other Latino students. His confidence grew as he helped organize events that brought them together—and also educated the larger community about Latino issues.

» As much as I didn't want to admit it, I was in fact political on this campus, by nature of my skin tone and my last name. And if you can empower a student, we can definitely move on to bigger and better things. I want to tell new students, "You have a voice, use it. You have a brain, use it." There's so much you can learn, and if you expect people to listen to you, they will. - STEPHEN

Because you are the first in your family to go to college, many challenges lie ahead of you—personal, academic, and financial. But as you step out into your new life, remember that you have already proved that you can meet a challenge. The intelligence and skills that got you to college will only grow stronger as you use them.

WHAT ARE YOU TAKING WITH YOU?

As you prepare to start college, think back on some of the challenges you have met so far. Later, you can use this list to remind you of your strengths and skills.

A personal challenge I faced:

What I did to meet it:

An academic challenge I faced:

What I did to meet it:

A financial challenge I faced:

What I did to meet it:

WHO STANDS BEHIND YOU?

Different people—perhaps a special teacher, mentor, or friend—have probably helped you get to this point of starting out for college. When you arrive, those people will continue to be interested in how it goes—and they will want to support you when you need it. Use this space to write down contact information for the ones you really counted on, so you can keep in touch.

Name _____

Email _____ Phone _____

Address _____

Name _____

Email _____ Phone _____

Address _____

Name _____

Email _____ Phone _____

Address _____

Name _____

Email _____ Phone _____

Address _____

Name _____

Email _____ Phone _____

Address _____

Name _____

Email _____ Phone _____

Address _____

Name _____

Email _____ Phone _____

Address _____
