

UF First Generation Students

Beyond the Podium Podcast

Alexandra

Hi, my name is Alexandra Bitton-Bailey and I want to welcome you to this episode of the Beyond the Podium podcast series. In this episode, you'll get to know two exceptional people. First, you'll get to know Adrian Cruz, who's a first generation student at the University of Florida and a Machen Scholar, and Dr. Leslie Pendleton, who is the director of the Machen Florida Opportunity Scholar's Program at the University of Florida. And she will tell you that she has the very best job here.

Adrian will share with us some of his very unique experiences that come from being a first generation student. These experiences of his are infused with humor, strength, gumption, and determination. One of his first experiences help us to frame what it means to be first in your family to attend college. It's his UF preview story.

Adrian Cruz

So I came to the University of Florida as a blind-- I was super blind. I didn't know what it was, what I was expecting. Because my parents couldn't afford a college tour, we only got to tour when we got to preview. So preview was the first time I saw UF campus. And funny story is I actually brought my whole entire family to preview, because I didn't know how that worked. So I had my mom, my dad, my grandparents, and my uncle touring the campus with me while I did preview.

So I had friends that were just coming up by themselves with their friends. It was just them without parents, while I'm here renting two hotel rooms and bringing my whole entire family.

Alexandra

One of the big challenges faced by first generation students is that they don't have someone who can walk them through what it means to go to college, what the experience is going to be like, and what to expect. There's no one to tell them stories about, hey, when I went to college, or to give them advice-- even simple advice, like where to go for help with your course, or who to ask if you have a question in your big lecture course. Can you email your teacher?

First gen students are great, but they may not know the ins and outs of navigating a university. And as faculty members, we might need to help them a little bit more by giving them those tidbits of advice that others might get from their parents.

Dr. Leslie Pendleton

First generation students are, as I'd mentioned, first in their families to go to college. At UF, and at many institutions, we define it, actually, as students who neither parent has earned a bachelor's degree. Occasionally that along that generational line, an older sibling or a cousin, maybe, has been to college. But not being afforded the social capital or the resources and the advice from parents who have been to college means that these students are really blazing the trail by themselves, in most cases.

We hear from a lot of students that they've had that influential high school teacher or guidance counselor or coach or neighbor, somebody who's recognized how academically capable and talented they are from a young age, who has almost planted the seed of, you're considering going to college, right? But they haven't had, again, those dinner conversations around, oh, when I studied abroad, or when I was a member of that social fraternity, this is what I learned from my college experience.

So they've not been afforded that opportunity from parents who have been there, done that, and so, again, are very academically talented, eager, mindful, of these opportunities that exist in this elusive college environment, but have never really had the parental understanding of what that means. That doesn't mean they don't have the parental support.

Many of them have very supportive parents who are their champions who are saying, do it, do it, do it. Go to college. I wish I had the chance to do it. But they just don't have that know-how of how to actually apply for college and financial aid and then navigate the college experience once they're here.

Alexandra

These students are incredibly gifted. Their families are dedicated to their success. But their families don't have the background to guide them through the experience. In many cases, this means the students find themselves having to be even more independent, taking on a role they may not have expected because they don't want to worry or concern their families. This is where their determination and gumption kicks in.

Adrian Cruz

I remember my first week I was like, all right, do I do laundry first? Or do I study? Or do I cook? Or what do I do? Do I go grocery shopping? Because it's not just being a college student. It's also being an adult, and it's also being a teenager at the same time. So it's that balancing aspect of, it's all hit at once. The moment my parents left, I went down five hour drive.

And the fact that the more I would call them for help, the more they would be worried. So it was the aspect of, all right, let me solve this myself and only call them when it's a big situation

because they don't know what's happening here. They still don't know what's going on here. They still didn't know what an internship was. They still didn't know what it meant for me to join organizations.

They would say, why are you joining organizations? Focus on your studies. And I'm like, that's not the way it goes. You need organizations to help you promote all this stuff. So the fact that I'm still teaching them what it means to be in college, and when I can't seek them for support and stuff like that, it's a big challenge. But I feel like if you overcome it, it builds your character a lot.

Alexandra

First generation students have to teach their families what it means to be in college while learning themselves. They have to carve out their place, discover their interests, and learn to balance work, life, family, and friends while helping their families to understand this, as well. For some this comes more easily than others.

Dr. Leslie Pendleton

We have students who really struggle to find their niche and their fit here. UF is a pretty high-wealth institution. Not a bad thing, necessarily, but we have students who come from all walks of life. And I think some of our scholars do struggle with kind of finding their fit and kind of connecting with others who maybe have led more of a high privileged life prior to college.

Alexandra

Not all students find their fit. And not all students come with the same background or formation. Some of these first generation students need a community to support them, to help them discover resources. In high school, many of them had a support system. But when they get to college, that support system is missing. It's shocking not to have a support system of peers, not to have that community to help. And that's essential to their success.

Adrian Cruz

Obviously, my parents didn't know anything about, like-- the moment I finished middle school, my parents didn't know anything about the education system. They're like, we don't understand it. Why are they making you do projects as elementary school? At the end of the day, the parents are the ones doing the projects. Or they don't know English.

So half of my coursework and classwork, they didn't know what it is, what it meant for me to get my associate's degree as a high schooler. They didn't know what it meant to apply to college.

They didn't know what it meant to take the SAT, ACT. So definitely when I got here, even though I didn't have that support from my parents, I didn't have that support I had from my cap advisor who would guide us all.

Because we were all-- the fact that I went to high school where it's predominantly all first gen, potential first gen college students, people of color, low income socioeconomic status, like, we were all helping each other. But then I get here and it's pretty much fair game. And then most of my friends I came up with high school are in the-- more in the business or the pre-med industry. Engineering, I had no one.

So I took this programming class without having a really close friend. Obviously, I made friends along the way with engineering. But not having that aspect of knowing, yeah, someone else is in my same shoes and are struggling the same way. So I didn't know when I came here my freshman year about Study Edge or any of these other-- private tutoring and stuff like that. So the first time I ever failed an exam was in college my first year.

Alexandra

For these students, faculty are intimidating. And taking that first step to introduce yourself, to make yourself welcoming, is invaluable to all students, but especially to those first generation students. Those strategies can help first generation students that sharing your story is really important.

Dr. Leslie Pendleton

I think it's as simple as the first day of class when you introduce yourself and you tell a little bit about your history and your background. First of all, I hope all faculty do that and tell a little bit about, here's where I went to college and here's what my degrees are. And here's what I like to do in my spare time.

I think any degree of making yourself sort of personable from the beginning and explaining a little bit about the history-- if you, yourself, are first in your family to graduate from college, share that and be proud of that. I think that that, again, opens the door. I think faculty sometimes are perceived from students as this all-knowing, scary kind of person who is so, so smart and almost untouchable. And sometimes that barrier, that divide, can be very intimidating, I would say for all students, but particularly for first gen students who have likely never met somebody with a PhD in their whole life. And that PhD is scary or intimidating.

And so I think, again, sharing that identity, if you do share that identity as a first gen college graduate, is important. But even if you don't, like me, if you're not a first generation college graduate, indicating early on in that semester that you recognize that students go through a lot and live complex lives, you can borrow those words if you want to, and that you're open to

wanting to really support and make sure that they feel supported by you. And that you have an open door. And please come to office hours.

So reinforcing those messages kind of early and often, I think, really make a difference for all students, but particularly those students who are dealing with more than waking up for class and going to the gym and joining an organization and hanging out with friends and going for ice cream. You know, the typical kind of student life is terrific for a lot of people. But for a lot of people, they have, again, all those other commitments. And so early and often is important of really being approachable.

Alexandra

For Adrian, it was an incredible discovery to learn about office hours, to talk to his professor, to discover the different resources to help him through the challenging courses. This meant so much, and has helped in countless ways. Open office hours, speaking to faculty, sharing your resources with your students is really valuable.

Adrian Cruz

Just having open office hours was pretty helpful, where I would reach out to professors and be like, hey, this is the first time I've taken this class. Or hey, this is the first time I've learned chemistry. So that's when they told me about different opportunities like, hey, these are TA hours - I didn't know what office hours were at that point. I didn't know what Broward tutoring was, what Study Edge was, what it was to get a book. I didn't know what was the cheapest way to get books so I didn't get books at first because they were, like, in the \$200s.

But even the professors themselves were like, I'm not allowed to do this, but there's other options for you to get books. Use Facebook, use this, this, and that. So the fact that I just went to one office hour and the professor was like, I'll meet you at your level, definitely gave me a good experience for chemistry, at least. Because I was the one that was a little bit behind. And they were like, here's the TA hours and stuff like that.

And the fact that one of the professors was for lab, he was Hispanic, kind of made me resonate with him. And he came and spoke to me in Spanish. I felt some comfort at first my freshman year. But definitely, other than that, it's just being able to go to office hours and being able to speak my mind, which I didn't think I could be able to because this professor's teaching 500 students. They're not going to know who I am.

Alexandra

Students are unique. Some struggle and some thrive. But it's the awareness that students are much more than simply their classroom persona, that there is a spectrum to them.

Dr. Leslie Pendleton

So just like any group of students, I think that our students really run the gamut, run the spectrum. I've got students who are completing honors theses and have been involved with the honors program while they're here. We have scholars on our program who are Cicerones who work at presidential events and green and host potential and current donors to the University of Florida.

So I have students who struggle who have a variety of relationships with parents and family members. I have students whose closest family members are maybe currently in the prison system. I have students who are caring for either dependent children of their own or family members, younger siblings.

Alexandra

This understanding can better frame the way we picture where students are coming from. Even more importantly, many of these students don't even realize the differences themselves. So the most important discovery is that there are resources available to all students.

Adrian Cruz

I just feel like it's kind of hard to realize where people come from. So I've noticed in my classes, especially for physics and the STEM classes, people come from different backgrounds of not even in just knowledge of resources. So when I took my SAT and ACT, I didn't have a tutor or someone that guided me.

And I kind of just took it on a glimpse and hoped for the best. I did it based off that one random SAT class we had in high school. But then I come here and I see myself sitting next to other students who are like, oh yeah, I had a tutor for physics, and a tutor for AP physics, a tutor for this, this, and that. I'm just like, wow. There is a big difference when you know your stuff.

Like, my parents were like, if you would've told us. I'm like, I would've told you if I would've known. They were like, we would have saved up to help you with a tutoring service and stuff like that. Then at the end I just feel like professors have to realize that people come from different levels.

So it was like a very different, like, who do I listen to do? Do I listen to my parents? Do I listen to my (University of Florida) preview staffer? Do I listen to my friends? It's the aspect of not knowing who to go for resources because there are just so many different people telling me so many different things.

But I feel like the main thing is-- maybe what UF can do with first gen students is like, these are the resources. Don't be afraid to ask. Because I feel like that's one thing at least some first gen

students is like, they kind of try to hold their pride where they're like, I'm here for a reason. I can do it as best as other people can.

But they don't realize being first gen sometimes can be a setback. So I feel like there's nothing specifically-- every situation is different. But I feel like if you say, these are resources for you to go because no one-- if I didn't ask, I would have not known if I didn't go out and ask. But I feel like there are some people that don't go out and ask. And they just keep pushing themselves back without realizing there's resources.

Alexandra

For these first generation students, knowing that others have been successful helps them to see and know that they, too, can do it.

Adrian Cruz

Knowing that there's been previous students that had-- if you can mention, oh, yeah, this student who got an A last year was in your same shoes, so knowing that reassurance. Because the moment I failed my first exam, I'm like, am I even equipped to be in engineering?

Alexandra

So we've addressed resources and the simple understanding of the college experience from the perspective of these students. But beyond this, first generation students are also missing some of the essential relationships that will afford them opportunities to experience things beyond the classroom. This is another area where we as faculty can help these first generation students make up for the lack of familial professional networks that they may not have.

Dr. Leslie Pendleton

So I don't like to spend a lot of time recognizing barriers and pointing out deficits. But I will for a minute because I think it's important. First generation students don't have those built-in professional familial networks. And what I mean by that is they don't say, I'm going home this summer and interning with my mom's friend who's a lawyer.

Because a lot of times, mom's friends aren't also professionally kind of connected. And so as a faculty member, as a staff member, if you have an opportunity in your lab, if you have an opportunity to provide a mentoring-- you know, connecting a student who wants to be a

pharmacist with one of your friends who is a pharmacist in town, those professional networks are so, so vital. It's not always who you know, but it's who you have learned from that can be helpful.

And so allowing or providing opportunities for first gen students to have some of those connections that their family likely is just not providing-- again, no fault of theirs, necessarily. It's just a matter of opportunity. And so when you realize that a student is first in their family, be excited about it. Be proud that you have an opportunity to teach them and learn from them. But then also try to help connect them in ways that they likely don't have those connections.

Alexandra

These students are remarkable. Their experiences are so different and add so much richness and depth to our classroom, and frankly, to all of our students. They come ready and willing to put to work in. Because at the heart, this is not just their desire, but it's about their dedication to their family. These students benefit from our openness, or willingness to share our stories, and our own experiences, and especially our resources. And they benefit from the opportunities that we make available to them. And most importantly, they offer a unique perspective to us all.

Dr. Leslie Pendleton

I'll never forget one student who had to step out of a class that I was actually teaching. And I followed up with her later, and I said, is everything OK? You had to leave class kind of abruptly. And she said, well, my mom just had to go into the hospital, and I'm the only English speaker in my family, so I actually had to translate kind of what was going on with her to her doctors who, at the hospital she was rushed to, there wasn't anybody who spoke Haitian Creole.

And so she's on the phone mid-class, and they need to step away, yet really take care of this pressing family issue. And so of course I was quickly very empathetic to her of what was going on. And I said, OK, well, follow up with me about your course material, but obviously your first priority right now is to help make sure that your mom is OK.

And so again, our students come from just this variety of, in many cases, complex family situations that they're trying to navigate. Yet, what I love is that they really see the end goal. They see that me earning a bachelor's degree and potentially a terminal degree later is going to influence and impact my family much, much more, I guess, holistically and for the long term, then dropping everything and rushing to Miami right now because something is a problem.

That doesn't mean that they're not emotionally available and supportive of their family. But they really have this undying connection and commitment to finishing their college degree. They want to finish what they start. You know, the 40 or 50 students sitting in your class, recognizing that

many of them have been through-- I mean, in many cases, and this would have been my case-- a lot harder lives than I've even had to experience as a faculty or staff member growing up.

And so that I think faculty, staff people recognizing the privilege that many of us bring to this institution is very different from those in your classroom, in many cases. And so we have a lot to learn, I think, from our students about resilience and about grit and gumption.

Alexandra

Thank you for joining us for this episode of the Beyond the Podium podcast series. And we hope to see you next time for more tips, strategies, and ideas on teaching and learning at the University of Florida.