

# I'M FIRST

## *Stories from first-generation college students and graduates*



Shiloh Penland

Director, TRIO Student Support Services/Adjunct Instructor

AAS, Wenatchee Valley College; BS, Washington State University; MA, Gonzaga University

As the first in my family to attend college, my biggest challenge was the fear of failure. I wanted to go to college and make my family proud, but I didn't think I was smart enough. Even though I had just finished high school, I started in remedial math and English. My parents didn't earn much money as manual laborers, so I paid for college with grants, loans, and earnings from my job. My college experiences taught me to work hard for what I want, have confidence in myself, and never give up. My education allows me to help students achieve their educational goals!

Chris Manning  
Student

Pursuing ABTA, Skagit Valley College

My primary challenge as a first-generation college student is not having someone to show me the ropes. I am doing everything for the first time, alone. I am paying for college with financial aid and I have a work study job. Last year, I also received a TRIO grant. Having a college education means someone will value me in the work force. They will know I had the dedication to strive for a better life. Skagit Valley College and the TRIO program has helped me to feel like I belong somewhere.



Sinead Fitzpatrick Plagge

Associate Dean, Basic Education and Transitional Programs

AA, Olympic College; BA & MA, Western Washington University

My parents came to the US with less than a high school education. My biggest challenge was trying to figure out how to navigate the transfer process. I was confused, had a lot of self-doubt, and questioned my ability to succeed. I paid for my education through student loans and a part-time job. I am proud to be a first-generation student, and my life work is to help others realize and achieve their own educational goals. In addition, I am able to provide my family with the opportunities and experiences that my parents had dreamed about when they moved to this country.

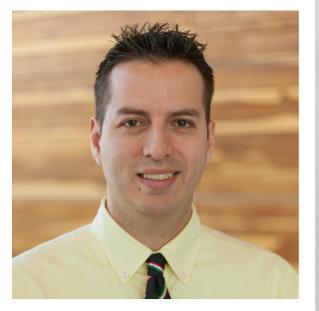


Estevan Vivanco

Student Success Navigator, Counseling & Advising Center

BA, Western Washington University (Two BA degrees in Spanish and Education)

My primary challenge as a first-generation college student was the feeling of confusion and uncertainty. Financial Aid paid for my first BA through grants, and I paid for my second degree with loans, including a conditional loan as part of my alternative route to a teaching certification program. My education is a tremendous part of who I am. I am honored to have the opportunity to share my story with others from similar backgrounds (especially the Latino population, including my own nieces and nephews) and hopefully inspire them to pursue post-secondary education as well.



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Rebekah Tarsi  
Student  
Pursuing AA, Skagit Valley College

The main challenge I faced as a first-generation college student was not knowing I was capable of doing this and not understanding how to apply, register, or get financial aid. I'm paying for my education with grants and student loans. Having a college education means everything to me and my children. I just got my GED five years ago and have been in college for two and a half years now. I graduate next quarter and will transfer to Western Washington University. The SVC faculty, staff, and the TRIO program have had a huge impact on me, and I will never forget it!

Jill McCabe Johnson, PhD  
English Professor, San Juan Center  
MFA, Pacific Lutheran University; PhD, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

My parents could not afford to send me to college. They had no experience in higher education, so they didn't know about options like financial aid or how to apply. Navigating those obscure paths was confusing and intimidating. Gaining an education has given me better thinking skills, a clearer understanding of history, the arts, and sciences, and opened my mind as well as professional doors. As an educator, I hope to help open minds and doors for students, and I'm proud to be part of a college system that proactively guides students through the same paths I found so difficult to navigate alone.

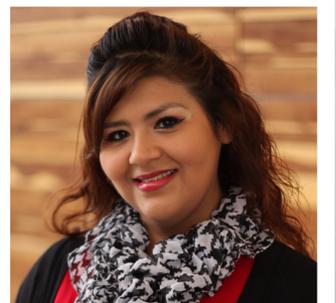


Alana D. Quigley  
Work First Navigator, Counseling & Advising Center  
AA, Skagit Valley College; BA & M.Ed. (pursuing) Western Washington University

The main challenge I faced as a first-generation college student was not having any idea what the college process looked like including admissions, financial aid, and expectations. I received grants, scholarships, did work study, and took out student loans. If I had a better understanding of student loans, I would not have taken so many. Having a college education means breaking the cycle of poverty in my family; it means giving my children a different future with options that they might not have had otherwise. It's showing my kids education is important and attainable.

Angelica Garcia  
Interim Program Support Supervisor, Enrollment Services  
AA, Skagit Valley College

My biggest challenge as a first-generation student was being brave enough as a single mother of three to come to school knowing I had no support or anyone with the knowledge of what college was or the struggles I would face. When I decided to be a full-time student and work part time, I received financial aid, loans, and a MECHA scholarship. I am an example that with hard work and determination you can achieve higher education. No matter at what age you attend college, education is important and still reachable.



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Noemi Rodriguez  
Student  
Pursuing AA, Skagit Valley College

My primary challenge as a first-generation student was the lack of home support. Overcoming the fear of looking unprepared or asking a dumb question paralyzed me. Having an education means that I am able to choose the type of job I want, rather than conforming to any job I can get. I want my children to have the support I did not have, as well as help other students who may not have that support at home. I would tell a first-generation student “don’t be afraid, you can do this!” and reassure them that they are not alone.

Cliff Palmer  
Instructor, Biological Sciences Department  
AS, Feather River College; BS, California Polytechnic San Luis Obispo; MS, Western Washington University

My primary challenges as a first-generation college student was finding a way to finance college and lack of college preparedness. I paid for college through a combination of work, Pell grants, and loans. Having a college education represents a number of things to me. It was a gateway into the type of world I desired (educational, social, and economic). I now have the opportunity to give back to the system through which I came up and to aid the next generation. Things are possible if you keep applying yourself and don’t let others tell you otherwise.



Brenda Guadalupe Valles, PhD  
Executive Director of Equity & Inclusion, Office of the President  
BA, California State University, Monterey Bay; MEd & PhD, University of Utah



My primary challenge as a first-generation college student was figuring out how to navigate the institution – how to ask for help and who to go to for help. I was embarrassed to ask for help, so I made a lot of mistakes. I financed my education through grants, loans, and a part-time job. Having a college education means I can offer leadership on behalf of the communities I grew up a part of and those that supported me as I underwent college, namely underrepresented communities. It means, I have the option of choosing where I live, work, AND having a career rather than a job.

Elizabeth Salinas  
Education Navigator, Counseling & Advising Center/Adjunct Instructor  
AAUCT, Skagit Valley College; BA & M.Ed., Western Washington University

My biggest challenges as a first-generation college student were the lack of insight I had on the whole college experience, and coming back to college when my children were in school. The first two years of college I received scholarships and grants. I also worked as a paraprofessional around my class schedule. At WWU, I took out student loans that I am still paying on today. My education gave me confidence in myself and the opportunity for social growth, learning, and to improve my skills in the profession I’m passionate about. It’s an opportunity to teach others and in turn learn from those I teach.



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Kelli White-Mellish

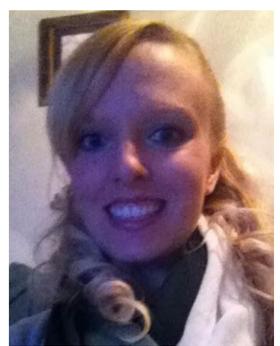
Adjunct English Instructor and Educational Planner, South Whidbey Center  
BA & MEd, Eastern Washington University

I think the hardest thing about being a first-generation college student was that there were times when my parents couldn't understand what I was going through. College was less expensive when I attended, so my parents helped pay, I took money from my savings account, and I had scholarships. I love my job, which I wouldn't be able to do without a college education. I believe my college education (and my experience teaching/advising at SVC) has helped me be a better parent of college students than my parents were able to be.

Ray O'Kelley  
Student

Pursuing ATA, Skagit Valley College

The biggest challenges I faced as a first-generation student was trying to juggle my work schedule and class schedule. I am an older student, so the other challenge I faced was knowing how to do homework and tests. I am under the Veteran's Vocational Rehab for disabled Veterans and I use financial aid to help supplement my income. Having my degree means the world to me. I have wanted a degree since graduating high school, but life circumstances happened, as well service to my country. The TRIO program has been amazing. I recommend that first-generation students sign up.



Nicole Harris

Faculty Counselor & Disability Access Services Coord., Counseling & Advising Center  
BA & MA, Western Washington University

My primary challenge as a first generation student was breaking the social/cultural misnomers that my family held, and helping them understand the expectations that I needed to meet. I paid for both my education with loans and a couple small scholarships. My college education means access, as I now have more information to make informed decisions about my life and my family. It means I can provide access to education for marginalized populations. As a result of my education, I am able to have a meaningful job. I am honored to serve students, often on the worst day(s) of their lives.

Claudia Avendaño-Ibarra

Faculty, Human Services Department

ATA, Skagit Valley College; BA, Western Washington University; MSW, Eastern Washington University

My primary challenge as a first-generation college student was financial instability. I'm from a migrant family with five children and my mother passed away at the age of 40. I was on my own as a 17 year old single mother. I worked full-time and went to school full-time. I paid for my books, covered expenses, and received scholarships to cover tuition. Having a college education means I get to be a part of SVC and inspire students by sharing my story. It also means I have the opportunity to be part of quality education, equity and access efforts, and I get to give back.

