

FIRST-GENERATION STUDENT REFLECTIONS



STORIES & ADVICE FOR STAFF, FACULTY, & FAMILIES



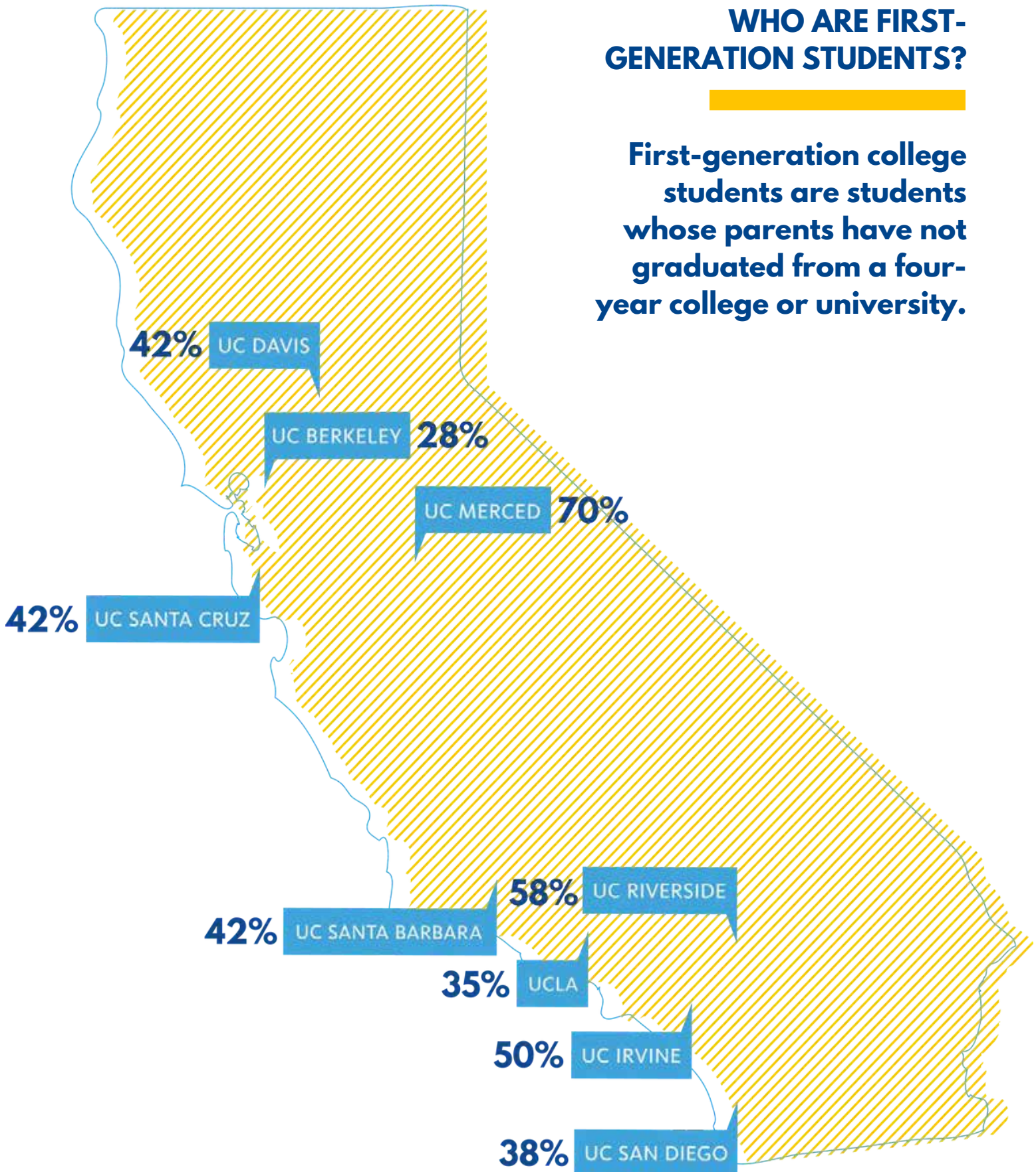
THE CULTURE & ACHIEVEMENT COLLABORATIVE

Percent of first-generation undergraduate students as of fall 2016

Source: UC Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

WHO ARE FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS?

First-generation college students are students whose parents have not graduated from a four-year college or university.



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"Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world."

—Nelson Mandela

THE PROJECT

A Conversation with First-Year, First-Generation Students

WHO WE ARE

The Culture and Achievement Collaborative (the Collab) is a research lab directed by Dr. Rebecca Covarrubias in the Department of Psychology at UCSC. The Collab includes a diverse group of undergraduate and graduate student researchers who strive to support first-generation, low-income, and/or students of color through research and practice. Read more about the Collab:

<https://rcovarrubias.sites.ucsc.edu>.

PROJECT GOALS

For first-generation college students, the transition to college often means learning a new cultural system, including norms, language, behaviors, and ideas. This cultural transition, while exciting and new, can also bring about challenge, particularly as students simultaneously navigate experiences at school and at home.

To address the cultural transition to college, we administered surveys and [facilitated a 2-hour interactive conversation with 19 first-generation college students](#) in the spring quarter of their first year. The conversation included reflection and discussion around the challenges and strengths of being a first-generation student.

Our goals for the community conversation included:

1. Review research and language on the cultural transition to college
2. Create a supportive community to reflect on shared experiences
3. Provide an introduction to campus resources
4. Solicit direct feedback on best practices for supporting FGs.

PROJECT OUTCOMES

Following the conversation, students were asked to evaluate the conversation and to write reflections to staff, faculty, and their families on what they want them to know about their experiences. This booklet consists of those voices, including students' sincere feedback for staff and faculty on how to better serve them, as well as words from the heart for their families. To read more about the program outcomes, please visit: <https://firstgen.ucsc.edu/news/2017/08/23/insights-conversation-first-year-first-generation-college-students-ucsc>.

REFLECTIONS FOR STAFF & FACULTY

Evaluation Questions. To gather feedback for staff and faculty on supporting first-generation students on campus, students responded to the following questions:

1. What do you want staff and faculty to know about your experience?
2. What are ways that staff and faculty can better support you?

Coding Procedure. Using a grounded-theory approach, the research team, including two graduate student researchers and one faculty member, constructed three primary categories: Assumptions, Resources, and Compassion. Student responses were coded using these three themes. These findings were then shared with student participants to ensure accurate interpretation.

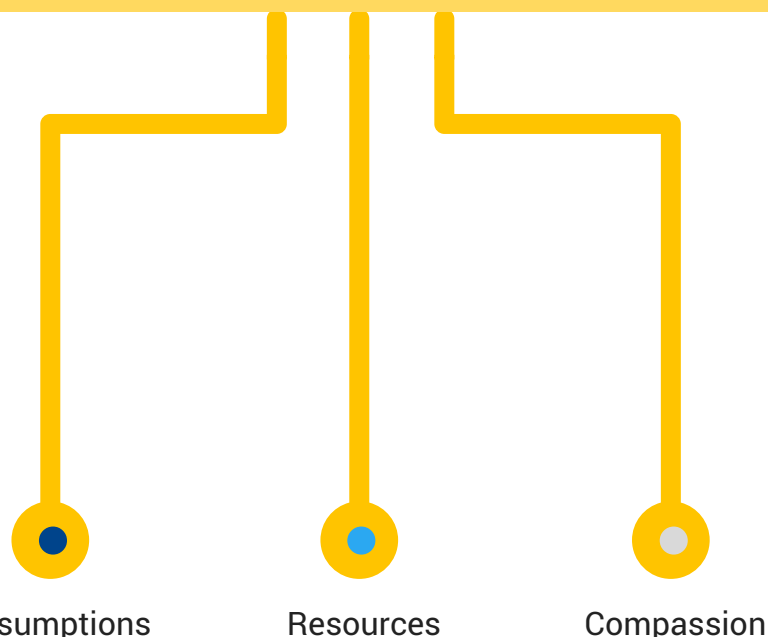
Summary of Findings. Students shared three major ways that faculty and staff can better support them. Please note that student feedback is more complex than these three themes, so we invite you to spend time reading students' voices in this booklet.


Student participants want staff and faculty...

1. To not make assumptions about who they are and what they know;
2. To share and bring campus resources to students; and
3. To show compassion and to "be human" so that they are more approachable.

Notes for Reading this Booklet:

- Each quote represents a new student and their response.
- Although all quotes demonstrate more than one theme, they are arranged by the most prevalent theme.
- The diagram to the right indicates three colors (dark blue, light blue, gray) that represent each theme. These colors are used to organize the following quotes.





“I want them to know that us first-generation students are often going to need more guidance and support than others. Not everyone comes from the same background. **It is easy to give universal definitions of us, but know that we are all different.** We learn in different ways and where we come from has not always been easy and we all share different types of personal struggles.

The staff and faculty could provide us with different resources that can suit our own specific needs. Many of us are new to the college experience and anything that you could do to facilitate these new experiences will benefit us in the long run.”

“I’m not used to classes full of White students and White teachers and White TAs. My school never went over the complexities of Aristotle’s Philosophies. I’ve never been to a theatre show that wasn’t free So, I don’t understand when you crack a joke about Aristotle’s politics and all the White students laugh, I don’t understand when you laud the merits of the stage. **Those things are not part of the world I come from, the world of underfunded schools and guilty success.**

Staff and faculty should consciously work to not cater solely to White students. They should analyze their actions and their modes of teaching and being. Seemingly harmless comments or gestures can mean a lot more to people who’ve dealt with so much and had so little all their lives.”

“All the work and all the effort I put into my classes [is] for my family and myself. I want to succeed so that I may provide a better life for my family. Every day I am in [the] university, I feel guilty and [that I] owe the world to my family.

Please do not assume that I had the same resources available to me as everyone else. I do not come from a high school with an overwhelming amount of resources or the best teachers.”

I may not be exposed to everything in the classes like other students. Know that explaining thoroughly the concepts will vastly help students like me to get the concepts and pass the class. **Being first-generation, I know I will struggle, but I will not give up. It is my passion to learn and apply what I learn in my life.**

Be more friendly and understand that not everyone already knows the materials/concepts in your intro classes. Explain in detail the concepts instead of just showing [what it is], that makes me feel [like] I cannot do it. Present more office hours and be more hands-on with the students and not leave it to the TAs. [Have] smaller lectures because big lectures are intimidating.

I want staff and faculty to be more culturally aware of people who do not look like them. I do not feel connected to my teachers enough, because they are mostly White and do not understand me. I do not want to feel like my experience as a Black woman is invalid because you do not go through my struggles. They need to know that being Black on this campus can be lonely and scary.

I want staff and faculty to listen to my voice if I ... tell them they are being harmful in the way [that] they teach... if you are being dismissive of people because of their race, sexuality, their body ability, and more, you need to check yourself.

I feel that faculty should make themselves more approachable. I know everybody says, "Oh, just go to their office hours, it is not that bad." But when I actually built the courage to go, I felt as if the professor expected me to know all this information because it was supposed to be a refresher. [W]e don't all receive the same information in high school, so it shouldn't be expected.

"Please do not assume that I had the same resources available to me as everyone else."

“My experience at this university has been mixed. I've had good and moderately bad experiences as a first-gen student. Some professors, especially [in] the STEM classes –[that] are very isolating—don't understand that as a first-gen, I did not have the same level of education and resources as those who are middle-class and not first-gen students. However, ... I also have received good feedback from professors when I have talked to them when I struggled with the material ... so overall my experience has been good and bad.

Faculty and staff can better support me [by] advertising more research opportunities and resources”

"I do not want to feel like my experience as a Black woman is invalid because you do not go through my struggles."

“I had a difficult time transitioning from high school to college. Most of the time I feel like I don't belong here, especially because I did not have the same resources as my peers. Staff and faculty should not assume that every student had the same resources and advantages.

Offer more psychological support. Be more inclusive and advocate diversity.”

“My experience isn't easy as a 1st-gen, as the 1st person of my family [to go to college], I still have a lot of questions [about] all sorts of things which means I will make mistakes I didn't come from a community where we got private tutors or writing workshops so I don't have the best writing skills ... it wasn't pushed in my hometown. **[K]eep in mind and be aware we all do not come from the same background.**

[Be] open-minded and non-judgemental Also [don't just] partially advertise, but get the word out about resources.”


[W]e don't all come from a place (academically) of having lots of resources. Meaning, things that we should have learned in high school, well, I didn't learn them. And [the] use of statements like "you should know this" and "this should be a review " and "how don't you know this, this basic high school information" etc., makes it hard for students to approach them with questions and concerns.

They should be more understanding meaning they should take into account that we are students, but we are also people with personal problems. Therefore, we may sometimes need extensions on things like tests and homework and we need them to be more accommodating.... Also, they should "check" what they say, since things they say can be taken as microaggression or create a feeling of alienation, or distrust.

It's not easy being the first person in your family to go to college, and especially if you are undocumented. It has been hard to juggle school and family responsibilities when half of the time professors expect you to automatically know certain things. My high school was not the best, so it is hard to catch up academically I can't relate to most people here because they are White and male, who think they are better than me, and can fit me into a stereotype. I have struggled because I want to succeed, for family, but it's hard when I don't feel like I belong.

"I have struggled because I want to succeed, for family, but it's hard when I don't feel like I belong."

Acknowledge that some students do not have the same resources as others. [Staff and faculty should] be more open and recognize the privilege they may have. Have a diversity training [for staff and faculty]. Have review sessions or provide resources for students in STEM who may not have the same high school background academically. Reach out to students who seem to be struggling.



“ I do not have the same background as most students, especially as first-generation and low-income [student].... There should be more opportunities to help students like me.

Focus on programs such as EOP and Slug Support. They greatly help students in similar situations. However, they don't help with everything I need like... financial aid. This is why they should be expanded or given a larger budget so that they can help students.”

“ Being [a] first-generation student can be very difficult, especially for first-year students. Many of us are not aware of the few resources there are and we also have a hard time locating these resources. It would be nice if staff/faculty could lead all students and especially first-gen students towards resources that will help them succeed in college.”

“ I would want staff and faculty to know my experience in my first year was very enriching and worthwhile. Although it has been tough financially, academically, and personally, I would not trade this opportunity for anything and I am very appreciative of it.

Some ways that staff and faculty can better support us are by advertising resources on campus better and helping to ensure students are not intimidated. I was always too scared to go to office hours, for example ... I did not get over this until I actually went and discovered how nice and open some of the staff are.”

“I want staff and faculty to know that I'm more often than not uncomfortable walking around campus and being in a classroom setting. This is because of the small percent[age] of Black students on this campus. I don't like being a part of an only 3% population of my race and I don't like being one of the two Black students in my class.



Faculty and staff can better support me by trying a little harder to understand where I'm coming from and why I feel some of the ways I do ... essentially, going out their way to make me feel a little more comfortable on campus.



“I would actually say that the faculty and staff I've interacted with and asked for help have actually been pretty nice and helpful.

Staff [have] done a good job at being understanding when I needed [help] and that has been one of the most comforting factors to finding a good balance.



“My experience in classrooms has been challenging because I [have] not always [felt] comfortable about my writing or speaking in class.

Staff and faculty should have more compassion and understanding about our situations. Giving us reassurance would have been good too.



“We all come from different academic and cultural backgrounds that may be completely different from their[s], but being open to understand these different experiences can help... students know that they are cared for.

Ways that staff and faculty can better support me are to share their knowledge ... opportunities, and valuable resources around campus.



REFLECTIONS FOR FAMILY

Evaluation Question. To help bridge the cultural divide between home and university contexts and to begin a conversation about the college experience, students reflected on the following question:

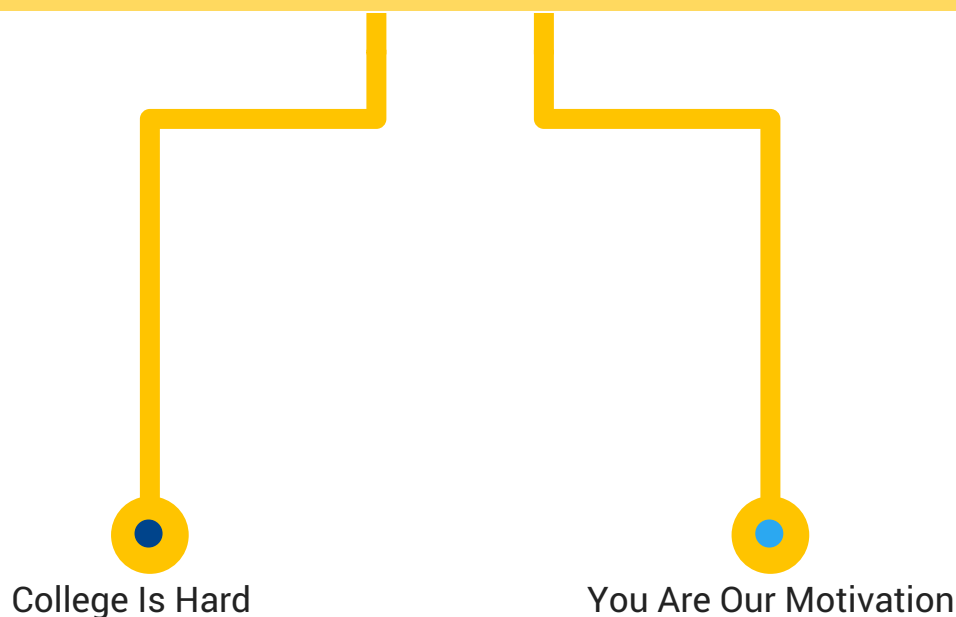
What do you want your families to know about what it's like for you in college?


Coding Procedure. Using the same grounded-theory approach, the research team constructed two primary categories: College is Hard and You Are Our Motivation. Student responses were coded using these two themes. These findings were shared with students to ensure accurate interpretation.

Summary of Findings. Students shared two major reflections on what they want their families to know about their college experience. Please note that student reflections are more complex than these two themes, so we invite you to spend time reading students' voices in this booklet.

Student participants want their families to know that...

1. College can be a difficult experience to navigate for many reasons, and
2. Their families are the main source of motivation for carrying forward in college.





“College is hard, though we all know that. On top of school work, some of us have jobs (sometimes more than one) to keep us fed and our families supported. For 1st gen students, it's probably our first time being independent and having to take care of responsibilities that our families have taken care of in the past. I feel guilty thinking about the money my family puts into education and it drives me to push myself really hard—which is good and bad. I would never take it back though.”

“**I want my family to know that being in college is tough for me, but it is something that I will benefit from.**”

“It is HARD to be here because we wish to still help out at home. We are doing this for them, to give them all that they deserved. I miss my siblings everyday, and I wish to help my parents financially. I do feel lost at times because I have no idea what I am doing. I wish I could still talk to my mom more often and be her support system. I do not mean to leave them hanging but I do have new responsibilities. I am doing my best to graduate and continue on to get my PhD. I want to be that role model for my siblings. I want to thank them for all their sacrifices.”

“**[College] is hard in all different ways.** Socially, it is challenging because constantly being reminded that you are different causes anxiety. **Academically, there is not a lot of resources to help me tackle the education I received in high school.** Overall, it's been a rewarding and humbling experience... I will always cherish my time here.”

“I want my family to know that yes, I picked to go here... [Y]es, I knew that Santa Cruz is not diverse, but that does not mean on my hard days when I feel alone you should bring up “you knew what you were getting into.””

I would say that it definitely has not been easy, but I've been able to handle it rather well given my current situation. [A]nd I would also like to say how I appreciate my parents letting me deal with college for what it is, while they deal with all the situations [back home] the best they can. I'd also say college is pretty hard but it allows you to grow as an individual at a much quicker and better pace than back home. College is a one of a kind experience.

I want them to know that it is very stressful here, so when I go home I just want to relax. I don't want to hear fights or be put to do chores around the house during the quarter. I always get the same remark saying I don't do any chores here in Santa Cruz, so when I go home I am forced to help instead of enjoying the limited amount of time I have with them.

It's hard. *Los amo y los extraño*, but it's hard. I'm struggling and I know this is hard for you, too. [B]ut, I want you to understand that I didn't go away to hurt you, or to waste my time and money. I'm working so we can have a better future, so you can stop working, so you can lay back on the couch and watch your *novelas* without your bones creaking and my heart aching. *Todo lo que hago es por ustedes.*

Understand that college is stressful, and their support, love, and encouragement is necessary and appreciated. I'm trying my best and want to do my best for our family, community, and myself.

"I want my family to know that being in college is tough for me, but it is something that I will benefit from."



“ I want them to know that I am doing okay and I am persevering to make them proud. **I don't want them to worry. They prepared me well with values and knowledge to be able to succeed.** I am learning to not make their efforts in coming to this country be in vain. In a couple more years, I hope to have fulfilled their expectations. It is difficult, but I know that with their support and love, I can do anything. ”

“ I would want them to know that I am trying my best to succeed here in college. And, that I am very grateful that I am here. I appreciate all the sacrifices they've made and are currently making so that I could be here. Also, I am trying to stay healthy. I know I still make mistakes but I'm trying to make you proud. ”

“ College is hard and I am happy you understand that I am trying my hardest to get the grades I want. I am in college for you, because you have helped me get here by pushing me to go to school every day, thank you for that. ”

“ **Mom, Dad. I'm tired. I'm so tired. I want to stop. But I can't. I'm doing everything for you guys.** So that you can have a retirement. So that [my brother] can go to school, too. Give me a couple of years. College has been so hard. I don't think I belong, even when I do good in my classes. I get some resources to help me and I'm taking out loans so that you don't have to work more. I've learned a lot. I've met a lot of interesting people. I've even partied and had fun. But, like I said, I'm tired. It's okay though. I can keep going. ”

“It’s difficult being so far away from home, but I am doing this for all of us. The reason why I work two jobs is so I won’t bother them financially because I know they don’t have the money to help me.”

“I feel overwhelmingly grateful to be in college, I feel pride and excitement to be able to be in such an environment with so many new experiences and opportunities. I want my family to know that I will always do my best, and that everything I do, and everything I accomplish is for them... [T]he sacrifices they have made are worth everything to me and the life I am building through my college experience.”

“...Sometimes I feel like I can't do this but [I] don't let this stop me... [M]y degree is for me and [my family] and for everyone who comes after me.”

“It’s so difficult, but it is all for you. I want a better life for my family because you deserve it. You came here for a better life and I want to give you the best of the best.”

“I just want my family to know that I’m not just away in college having fun 24/7. I’m here to receive an education—a diploma to have a brighter future for myself and my family also— I’m not just doing this for me.”

"I am in college for you, because you have helped me get here by pushing me to go to school everyday, thank you for that."



Dedicated to all the first-generation college students, their families, and their communities who are persisting, forging new paths, and changing the world.



To join the conversation or to learn more, contact the research team (ucsc.collab@gmail.com) or get involved with UCSC's First-Generation Initiative (firstgen@ucsc.edu).

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