

Helping first-generation students find their way

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A little well-timed support can smooth the transition for first-time university students.



Photography by Daniel Ehrenworth.

When Emzhei Chen moved into residence at the University of Waterloo about 10 years ago, she found the experience nerve-wracking. Her parents supported her, but her dad was a machinist who had never gone to university and her mom hadn't finished high school, so they were as unfamiliar with universities as she was. She saw a reference to "first generation" on the application form (a term that meant your parents hadn't attended a postsecondary education institution or had done so abroad), but she doesn't remember checking the box. "It didn't seem to be a pressing characteristic," she says. "I didn't think it was important."

And yet, without parents or older siblings to help familiarize her with how universities worked, she became overwhelmed sorting through a confusing array of course options and developing a self-directed study plan. She brought a heavy backpack filled with all her books to campus, as she'd done in high school, not realizing at first that she only needed to bring books for the courses she had that day. She also assumed there wasn't any homework since the professors weren't writing it on the blackboard. In another blow to her confidence, she sensed that many fellow students seemed to have arrived understanding how everything worked.

Today, at 28, Ms. Chen has her MEd from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at University of Toronto and her job is coordinator of first-year programs at U of T's Scarborough campus, where she deals with so-called "first-gen" students on a daily basis. Two of them joined us one day in an office in the department of student life.

Faria Khandaker started her studies at U of T Scarborough in 2013 and almost immediately struggled with the workload. "My parents had gone to university a long time ago, in Bangladesh, where postsecondary education isn't the same as here," she explains. A petite 20-year-old wearing a black jacket over a white tunic and purple hijab, she

says that her parents could offer little practical advice about the world in which she found herself at U of T.

“In the first few weeks I was having trouble figuring out how to manage my time. I was really struggling with a physics course and didn’t want to have a bad grade on my transcript.”

Fortunately, she’d attended a “Get Started” session in the summer, where a volunteer told her about resources available for first-gen students. She met with a peer academic coach, a fourth-year student who was first generation, too. Her coach showed her a time management tool and told her she could drop physics if she wanted to. “I wasn’t aware that you could drop a course,” says Ms. Khandaker. “I thought you were just stuck with it.”

For the rest of the year, her coach was like a surrogate parent, keeping in touch, meeting to discuss concerns, messaging her about events and encouraging her to get involved in campus life so her university experience wouldn’t only be about workloads and stress.

Now Ms. Khandaker is herself a peer academic coach assigned to Adela Zeng, an 18-year-old international student from China who started at U of T last September. “When I met Faria,” says the younger woman, “she told me about her experiences and helped me calm down. I was having a lot of trouble with a sociology course so she showed me time management strategies. My parents are both in China so my peer academic coach is like my friend and a family member, always there to help me.”

Although it’s hard to quantify the number of first-generation students – not all identify themselves as such or seek assistance – some studies indicate they represent up to one-third of all students at some Canadian universities. They skew slightly older than the average undergraduate age of 18 to 25 and often come from lower-income families where English is a second language.

But finances aren’t the most important issue. According to a 2011 Statistics Canada study, “Intergenerational Education Mobility: University Completion in Relation to Parents’ Education Level,” having no family members who attended college or university was a significantly higher obstacle to higher education than family income.

Other statistics are even more worrying. Although most jobs in coming decades will require a degree or diploma, only 53 percent of young people whose parents did not attend university or college will participate in postsecondary education. According to a 2009 report by the former Canadian Millennium Scholarship Foundation, participation is not the same as successfully completing a program. In 2009, just 23 percent of Canadians whose parents didn’t attend university earned a degree, compared with a 56-percent graduation rate for those whose parents hold at least one degree. “First-generation youth are less likely to plan for higher education, to be convinced of its benefits or to have above-average high school grades,” the report noted.

Danielle Lorenz, 30, who is completing a PhD in educational policy studies at the University of Alberta, is the first in her immediate family to go beyond high school. In 2009, she wrote about her experience and those of first-gen colleagues on TalentEgg, an online job board for Canadian university students and recent grads. (Among the many challenges, she listed “being confused by the application process; no knowledge of academic expectations; confusing jargon by the institution; lack of information regarding support systems on campus; not having support of parents and family; guilt in regards to the postsecondary experience.”

While her parents (a hydro lineman and a stay-at-home mom) encouraged her to go to university, they couldn’t provide any practical guidance. While she muddled her way through her first couple of years, she had classmates whose parents helped them navigate the registration process and even helped to write their essays. Her experience isn’t unique: a 2012 study in the *Journal of College Student Retention* reported that lack of parental support meant first-generation students experience higher levels of stress and anxiety.

“Things have improved,” says Ms. Lorenz. “I did my undergrad at McMaster [University] and back then I couldn’t find resources to help me. Today Mac has a first-gen program.”

Over the past half-dozen years, many universities have begun addressing first-gen students in some way. Full-scale programs are mainly at Ontario universities, which perhaps isn't surprising since the largest number of new immigrant families also settle in that province. (These include U of T's First in the Family; Algoma University's First Generation Project; Ryerson University's Tri-Mentoring Program; and University of Ottawa's First Generation program.)

Rather than using targeted programs, universities in other provinces may offer all qualifying students resources that can be particularly useful for first-gen students. Examples include University of Regina's UR Guarantee and University of New Brunswick's Work-Study Program.

Neil Buddel, as a graduate student in educational policy at the University of Alberta, developed a program called TURN (for Transition to University: Residence Network) to help first-gen students fine-tune their academic skills, build self-confidence and develop social networks, often with peer support. TURN was replaced by BaseCamp, a program that aims to help all first-year students, including first generation, adjust to the university experience.

Dr. Buddel, who was once a first-gen student himself, is now dean of students at Toronto's Centennial College. The research, he says, points to social class being a key influence on how students see themselves in relation to postsecondary education. In the case of first-gen students, the "story" that many tell themselves is that they're missing advantages that other students enjoy. This accounts for why (based on Statistics Canada data) more first-gen students are likely to apply to community colleges or to universities that are perceived as being less prestigious. Says Dr. Buddel: "You apply to institutions that you see as being more like you."

While peer-support programs seem to be the most effective solution on a day-to-day basis, the challenge facing first-gen students, and anyone who sees themselves as disadvantaged in some way, is early intervention, says Dr. Buddell. In Scandinavian countries, which have high pedagogical standards for early childhood education, "the social class of children is not as tied to their parents," he says. Children from poorer backgrounds show "a measurable increase in postsecondary success."

In Canada, too, a school-support program called Pathways to Education has had resounding success in helping students from less privileged backgrounds graduate from school and continue on to college or university. The program began in 2001 in the poor Regent Park neighbourhood of Toronto where, in less than a decade, the dropout rate plummeted to 10 percent from 56 percent and where an astonishing 80 percent of students who took the program enrolled in postsecondary education. The early intervention program has now expanded to communities across the country.

Of course, some first-gen students make a seamless transition from high school to university. Christine Le, a doctoral candidate in organic chemistry at U of T, is an academic star – she is the sole Canadian named to *Forbes* magazine's Top 30 Under 30 list earlier this year. Raised by her single mom, a beautician who emigrated from China, Ms. Le earned top grades in high school. Encouraged by some of her teachers, she had no problem adjusting to the undergraduate program at Western University. "I was first generation," she says, "but I didn't feel a need to identify myself that way."

That's why Krista Kermer, Trent University's student success co-ordinator, uses a holistic approach. Trent has about 1,000 first-gen students among its 8,000 undergrads, and Ms. Kermer says many of them dislike the label because it comes with the stigma of being lower class and unsophisticated. They prefer to blend in. "We don't want first-gen students who aren't having a problem to say to themselves, 'Am I supposed to be having a problem?'" she explains.

Although it does offer a first-gen panel during summer orientation, Ms. Kermer's team relies on extensive but informal programming and outreach. A peer-to-peer support group called Rebound offers help to all students who are struggling academically. It also has an off-campus network of young staff who meet with students who self-identify as first gen.

Identifying oneself that way can open up a wealth of resources. When 22-year-old Danielle Plumpton moved from a small southeastern Ontario town to Peterborough, she had no friends and had trouble registering – she didn't know the difference between a major and minor or what an honours degree meant. But because she had ticked the box on the application form that said “first generation,” a month or so into her first year she got an email from one of Ms. Kermer's staff inviting her to talk to someone her own age who could answer questions.

She ended up switching from a BEd program to a double major in psychology and business because she loved psychology, and now she plans to apply to a master's program. She also joined the off-campus network of advisers to help other first-gen students. “I didn't have anyone when I first started here,” she says, “so I feel like I can be that person for others.”

Farther north, Algoma University has a diverse student population of approximately 1,600, including First Nations and international students, many of whom qualify as among the campus's roughly 300 first-gen students. Melissa Ouimette, who works in student services as the “first-generation assistant,” created and now co-ordinates the First Generation Project, funded by the province. “It's a dream job,” says Ms. Ouimette, herself a former mature student and first-gen student at Algoma. “We focus on retention through the four years of their degree and I love seeing them graduate. We give them a first-generation pin when they walk across the stage.”

One of those she mentored was Kimberly Pelletier, a 48-year-old mother of two young adults from a tiny Anishinaabe reserve. When she enrolled in a bachelor of social work program at Algoma three years ago, she was the first of 13 siblings to go to university. She worried about being too old to relate to her young classmates, but right away she met Ms. Ouimette, who was close in age and had grown up in the area. Soon she began helping with weekend events and meeting other students, where she found that being first generation was what they all had in common. Last year, she presented a paper about her life as a first-gen student at a national social work conference in Ottawa. In describing the role she has taken on at Algoma, she basically sums up the best-practices approach to working with first-gen students.

“It all ties into my interest in social work,” says Ms. Pelletier, “and it relates to the Anishinaabe part of me. I can use my experience and wisdom to help people younger than me with guidance and direction.”