

CLD Corner—Go First, Go Strong: First Generation Graduate Students

By: Diana Vega, BS, CLD Committee Student Member

My mom always told me, “Estudia, prepárate, la educación es lo más importante y no quiero que acabes limpiando casas como yo,” which translates to “Study, prepare yourself, education is the most important thing, and I don’t want you to end up cleaning houses like me.”

My parents came to the United States in search of a better life for our family. My mom works as a housekeeper and my dad as a truck driver. Together they have worked endlessly to provide a comfortable life for my brother and me. Even though my dad only completed high school and my mom completed middle school, they expected me to continue my education after high school, although they didn’t know what it entailed. Both of my parents firmly believed that with an education one would have the opportunity to live the American dream.

As my senior year of high school crept up, I didn’t know what I wanted to study in college. I wholeheartedly knew I needed to attend college to make my parents proud and for a better future. My parents moved to this country from Mexico for better life opportunities, and they wanted me to take advantage of that. When considering what to study, I realized that I had a heart for helping people, but my knowledge of different careers was limited to those I had encountered. I thought about becoming a teacher, nurse, doctor, or psychologist because that’s what I had been exposed to. However, in my junior year of high school, my aunt suggested the field of speech-language pathology. After an extensive online search, this field was something I became and continue to be very interested in.

I was very fortunate to have parents who pushed me to go to college. However, as a first-generation college student, I had to uncover the process of higher education on my own. I felt as if everyone else had insider knowledge that I had to discover by myself. As I started to embark on the journey to pursue my bachelor’s degree, I began to perceive an overwhelming amount of pressure and expectations. Luckily, at Stephen F. Austin State University (SFA), I found my safe place. Getting there was not easy, but I was always very assertive and willing to ask for help. At SFA, I had an amazing opportunity to be a part of a life-changing program called GenJacks, a group created specifically to guide and support first-generation college students. It was with this program that I was able to overcome the financial, educational, and social barriers of being a first-generation college student. The most remarkable part of the program was the supportive environment created by being connected to other first-generation college students experiencing the same difficulties and overcoming those barriers together. Furthermore, it was through that program that I began my advocacy and support for first-generation college students.

When I began considering graduate school, I became overwhelmed once again, but this time, I also questioned my own self-efficacy. I would hear about the low acceptance rates, the preposterous cost, and the extensive requirements typical of graduate school. With help from mentors and the knowledge I had gained from my career development courses, I was committed to investing all my time and effort into these applications. However, this would have been impossible without all this support.

When considering graduate schools, I was specifically in search of a program with a Spanish bilingual emphasis or certification. However, my choices were limited to the fact I would have to be near home due to the insufficiency of loans in order to cover both tuition and living expenses. I would hear of students applying to five or more schools, both in state and out of state; however, that was not an option nor financially attainable for me. This limited my choice to three within the one-hour radius of my parents’ home. One of those just so happened to be my dream school and where I am now—Texas Christian University (TCU).

I could not have made it to where I am today without the undeniable support from my family, friends, mentors, and the GenJack program. Being a first-generation student can be surpassed with support and guidance. In spite of many first-generation students surpassing these barriers, not every first-generation college student can get the support necessary to persevere through the rigors of the higher education process and that of speech-language pathology.

Diana Vega is from Fort Worth, Texas, and is a current graduate student at Texas Christian University. Attending this school has been her lifelong dream because it is one of the only universities in Texas with a bilingual emphasis program in speech-language pathology. When she graduates, she plans to work as a speech-language pathologist in the medical setting.

What Does it Mean to Be First-Generation?

According to The Center for First-Generation College Student Success, the term “first-generation” implies the possibility that a student may lack the critical cultural capital necessary for college success because their parents did not attend college (“Defining First-generation,” n.d.). First-generation students often face unique challenges in attaining a degree, such as conflicting obligations, poor preparation, and lack of support (Zalaquett, 1999). These challenges often arise from their ability to function and thrive in two different cultures, that of their home and that inherent to higher education (Petty, 2014).

Every home culture is different, resulting in each first-generation college student coming with their own set of expectations and family responsibilities. The home culture of millennial Mexican-American youth is often marked by two conflicting mindsets: the one centered on family and short-term stability and the mindset of long-term growth. According to a study conducted to analyze first-generation college students’ achievements, a significantly higher percentage of first-generation students come from minority backgrounds (Zalaquett, 1999). These students often carry the title of low-income, due to their parents never having attended college. This is reflected by the percentages of degrees obtained; 60 percent of students from high-income households obtained a bachelor’s degree or above compared to the 14 percent of individuals from low-income households (Renbarger & Beaujean, 2020). Students from low-income families may have to juggle their time between attending college and working. While numerous students work during their college years, first-generation students likely have the responsibility to financially support themselves or their family independently. Given this obligation, first-generation students may prioritize work responsibilities over studying or growing professional skills through extracurricular academic involvement.

First-generation students are just as brilliant and motivated as their non-first-generation peers. The challenge of first-generation students lies in an underlying lack of the necessary knowledge and access to the resources key to navigating the complex college system. These students often report feeling out of place in the college atmosphere, which can lead to poor confidence in their ability to succeed or achieve higher than average academic success.

Higher education not only opens doors but also leads to personal development, increased independence, and higher confidence while learning the necessary objectives to become adept in a particular field. First-generation students make up a third of all students in the U.S., yet only 27 percent will earn a bachelor’s degree within four years of entering college (Eab, 2019). Oftentimes, a college degree is seen as an investment for a better future. First-generation students who have completed a bachelor’s degree attribute their success to seeking help, finding a mentor, utilizing campus services, or participating in programs geared at college success. These programs guide, support, and encourage these students within the collegiate environment. However, there are many students who fall through the cracks without even knowing they are first-generation students.

First-Generation Graduate Students

There is a significant gap in research exploring the success and applications of first-generation students considering graduate school. By the time first-generation college students begin to contemplate continuing their education, they have overcome many obstacles of being first-

generation. However, an additional set of obstacles arises when considering application to graduate school.

These brand-new obstacles may often lead first-generation students to reconsider whether it is worth continuing their education as they have already worked diligently and theoretically can enter the workforce with their bachelor's degree. Attending college for another two or three years will be more costly, which often leads to more student debt. All things considered, the student may begin to contemplate a choice between financial stability or furthering their education. Furthermore, graduate school focuses on more in-depth knowledge in a particular academic discipline, which encompasses research and clinical or experiential practice. It is often believed that graduate school makes you more marketable; however, some careers, such as speech-language pathology, require a master's degree in order to practice.

In that aspect, the field of speech-language pathology is more challenging than the average college degree. It has been assumed that programs have low acceptance rates due to the limited program sizes, high-grade point average requirements, extensive review of extracurricular activities, and GRE score requirements. Moreover, these high expectations can often discourage the applications of those who do not have these requirements or the guidance necessary to overcome these factors.

Another hurdle in becoming a speech-language pathologist is that a bachelor's degree in speech-language pathology will only allow you to work as a speech-language pathology assistant (SLP-A), which can limit one's work experience and growth opportunities if one does not continue toward a master's degree. Some students choose to become an SLP-A prior to graduate school to gain experience in the field; others have no choice due to denial from graduate programs.

This leads us to the following question: Who are the students interested in a master's degree in speech-language pathology who get denied? What are the reasons for denial, and what happens to them after being denied for graduate school? How are they different from first-generation students who do succeed in getting admitted to a speech-language pathology graduate program? Inconveniently, there is no research published on the percentage of first-generation students pursuing a master's in speech-language pathology, but one can infer the percentage is small from the low percentage of first-generation students who complete their bachelor's education. Moreover, it has been noted that speech-language pathology programs tend to lack diversity. However, speech-language pathology is not to blame there, as there is minimal diversity across all graduate programs. A survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Education revealed that in 2015-2016, the percentage of students who earned a master's degree or above was made up of 66.5 percent white students (Snyder, De Brey, & Dillow 2019). Of the remainder students, 13.7 percent were black, 9.7 percent Hispanic, 7.1 percent Asian Pacific Islander, and .5 percent American Indian Alaskan Native (Snyder, De Brey, & Dillow 2019).

Notwithstanding the lack of visibility and opportunity for first-generation students, there continues to be an increased awareness of the culturally and linguistically diverse population in the United States. A culturally and linguistically diverse individual comes from a diverse cultural, social, or economic upbringing. Often, first-generation college students may fall within these culturally diverse populations (Lundberg, Schreiner, Hoyaguimian & Miller, 2007). More importantly, it has been found that culturally diverse students are lacking in graduate programs across the United States (Renbarger & Beaujean, 2020).

These facts make us wonder what we can do in order to support and acknowledge both first-generation students and those who are culturally diverse in the field of speech-language pathology. We need to start by bringing awareness and acknowledgment to those who are first-generation in addition to the barriers they may encounter in the graduate school application process.

Graduate school acceptance should be based on a student's ability to succeed in a program, not their GRE scores. The GRE takes a toll on student diversity in graduate programs as both the cost of taking the test and test preparation material are not cheap. The GRE is a standardized test that

reflects certain demographic characteristics of test-takers, including family socioeconomic status (SES) (Miller & Stassun, 2014). This highly impacts first-generation college student success on the GRE, due to the high correlation between being low SES and a first-generation student. A student's GRE score is disparate to that of their intellectual capacity or academic preparation, as it tells us nothing about a student's determination, creativity, or the intellect essential to finish a graduate program (Clayton, 2016).

Once the first-generation students have overcome the application process, we need to provide them with emotional, cultural, and financial support in order for them to continue on to survive graduate school. Graduate school is no walk in the park for anyone. It has been noted that "graduate students are over three times more likely than the average American to experience mental health disorders and depression" (Puri, 2019). On top of that, first-generation students are already prone to doubt their academic abilities and may believe they are not graduate school material. In addition to self-doubt, a first-generation student also may feel an overwhelming sense of responsibility to make their family proud, as I did. Our families often do not understand the rigor and the time investment needed in graduate school. As much support as my family has given me throughout my graduate career, they continued to ask of me time I could not provide due to schoolwork and externships. Furthermore, the financial burden of graduate school is either placed solely on the student or the student and the family. A realization I recently came to was that if it weren't for the financial support TCU provided me, graduate school would not have been possible. There was not enough loan money for me to cover both tuition and living expenses if I would have gone to a school away from home. I think it is important to take into consideration the financial needs of each student and advocate for more scholarships at the graduate level for first-generation students, as not only tuition but also living expenses are a substantial part of being able to pursue a master's degree.

I cannot even begin to express the importance of mentorship through all levels of education. Mentorship is a "purposeful and educative process" that can assist students by providing guidance, feedback toward personal development, and a model to strive toward (Anderson B., Cutright & Anderson S., 2013). The GenJack program gave me a strong foundation to work with in order to work toward graduate school. Although my mentor did not work in the field of speech-language pathology, it was through the GenJack program that I gained connections that supported me through the application process and gave me the confidence to reach out for help when I needed it. First-generation students and all those who stumble through the application process can seek guidance and support from someone who has experienced the difficulties themselves or who has overcome the graduate school application process. Mentorships between graduate students and undergraduate students could be of benefit as they have just gone through the application process. In other words, mentorship can be the key to not only help support first-generation students through the graduate school process but also to increase diversity in the field of speech-language pathology.

To any first-generation college student reading this, you can do it. It is not an easy road, there will be barriers to surpass, and it will seem impossible, but just know this it is okay to ask for help. It will get better, and never give up on your dreams. —Diana Vega

Resources for All

[First Generation Foundation – Supporting first generation college students](#)

[10 ways to support first-generation students in 2019](#)

[Resources on First-generation Student Success](#)

Resources for Students

Am I Supposed to Be Here?' When You Feel Like an Impostor on Campus

Guilt About Succeeding

First Generation College Students | Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS)

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*The CLD Corner was created in an effort to provide information and respond to questions on cultural and linguistic diversity (CLD). Questions are answered by members of the TSHA Committee on Cultural and Linguistic Diversity. Members for the 2019-2020 year include **Andrea Hughes**, MS, CCC-SLP (co-chair); **Irmgard R. Payne**, MS, CCC-SLP (co-chair); **Mary Bauman-Forkner**, MS, CCC-SLP; **Isabel Garcia-Fullana**, MA, CCC-SLP; **Daniel Ibarra**, MS, CCC-SLP; **Amy Leal Truong**, MS, CF (clinical fellow); **Mirza J. Lugo-Neris**, PhD, CCC-SLP; **Maria Resendiz**, PhD, CCC-SLP; **Diana Vega Torres**, BS, (graduate student member); and **Adanna Burrell**, MS, CCC-SLP. Please submit your questions to TSHA_CLD@gmail.com and look for responses from the CLD Committee on TSHA's website and in the Communicologist.*

