

STARTING THE RACE

A MILE BACK



Exploring the Experiences of First-Generation College Applicants

Every August, the race begins. Like clockwork, high school seniors across the country tackle the college admissions process. For many, it is a challenge they have been preparing for since the beginning of high school. Years of extensive extracurriculars, parental involvement and college counseling have led up to this moment, and students have spent most of their high school careers perfecting their resumes for thorough scrutiny from admissions committees across the country.

For others, this process isn't just daunting, it's completely foreign. First-generation students, generally defined as students whose parents did not complete a degree in the U.S. or at all, have consistently trailed their peers in access to resources. They are forced to navigate

the complicated admissions process on their own, all while juggling standardized tests, supplemental essays, scholarships and financial aid. First-generation students are often members of underrepresented populations in education, from those with financial disadvantages to non-native English speakers.

Recent data even suggests that first-generation status sets students at a disadvantage later on in life. According to a 2021 report from the Pew Research Center, only 20% of first-generation college students earn at least a bachelor's degree, compared to 82% of students with two college-educated parents. In a system that heavily favors those with knowledge of the college admissions process, students without any prior insight are at an inherent disadvantage.

FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS IN NORTHERN VIRGINIA

AKASH BALENALLI ONLINE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Inequity in college admissions stems mostly from the lack of information families unfamiliar with the college system have compared to those who know how the system works. “There’s so much background knowledge you have inherently from living in the U.S., as opposed to someone who’s coming [from] outside of the U.S.,” said counselor Brook Dalrymple, co-sponsor of the McLean College Partnership Program (CPP). “Students who had parents [attend] school in the U.S. [know] all the background information that they’re coming in with, just like a student who is going into a U.S. History class having lived in the U.S.”

First-generation students’ demographics are largely divided along racial and socioeconomic lines. According to the Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Student Success at Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA), 35% of students in Fall 2017 who were the first in their family to attend a higher-learning institution were Pell Grant recipients. By comparison, only 25% of non-first-generation students qualified for the financial aid grant. According to Dalrymple, NOVA is one of the most commonly attended schools by McLean graduates.

“I STILL THINK, SYSTEMATICALLY, IT’S A STRUGGLE FOR STUDENTS.”

- BROOK DALRYMPLE
COLLEGE PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM CO-SPONSOR

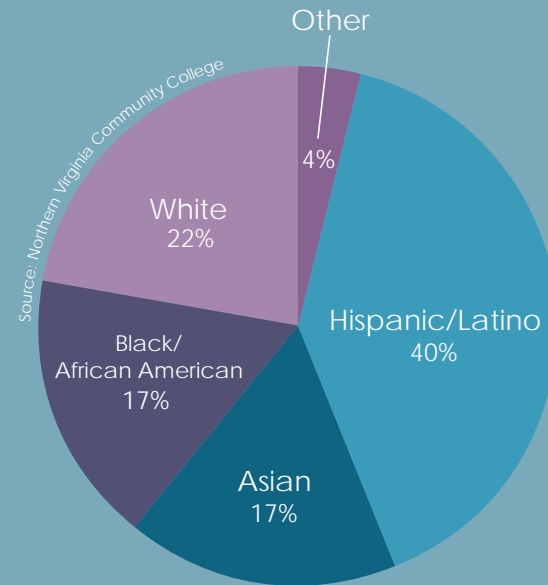
McLean’s Student Services has sought to resolve these inequities through “tier-one” services, which are available to all students regardless of income.

“We like to put on a lot of workshops,” Dalrymple said. “We have our Junior Focus Day, [and] we put on Parent University to provide more parent education and resources...We try to bring in people who are experts in the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) to help families complete it, and they sit side-by-side in a computer lab to complete [the application].”

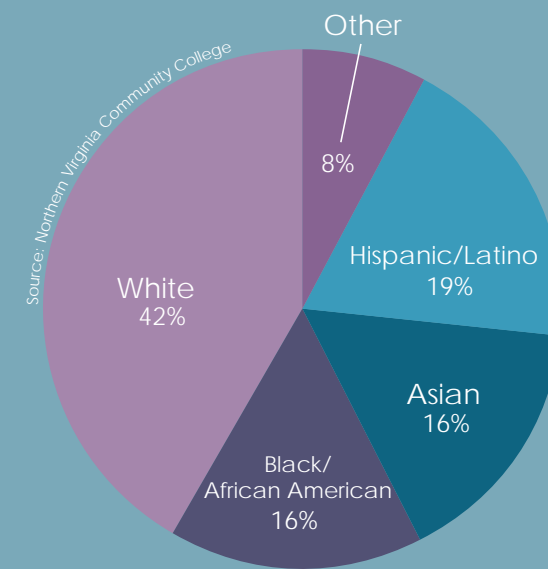
Other barriers, however, mean McLean’s Student Services can’t always reach the intended audience.

“Parent University [only works] when parents are checking their Fairfax County email and can take time off during the day to...hear that information,” Dalrymple said. “We sit down with every single senior to check in on the college application process, [but] I still think, systematically, it’s a struggle for students.”

RACIAL MAKEUP OF NOVA STUDENTS



Racial makeup of first-generation students at Northern Virginia Community College in Fall 2017



Racial makeup of non-first-generation students at Northern Virginia Community College in Fall 2017

Infographic by Akash Balenalli

AXEL HERNANDEZ ESOL STUDENT REACHES FOR SUCCESS

ARIANA ELAHI DESIGN EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
ALEENA GUL EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Four years ago, 14-year-old Axel Hernandez and his family uprooted their lives, moving from Puerto Rico to the mainland U.S. after his stepfather earned a promising new job opportunity. It would change the course of his childhood—but when he first moved to McLean, immense challenges made assimilation difficult.

“It was really hard at first since I didn’t know any English,” Hernandez said. “I just knew some basic words. It was really hard making friends and talking to teachers. In my [freshman] year [at McLean], when a teacher talked to me, I couldn’t understand anything.”

On top of the language barrier, the mainland education system complicated his transition.

“The education here in the U.S. is more advanced, and at first it was really hard,” Hernandez said. “Like math, for example—in [Puerto Rico], we don’t have Geometry or Algebra 2. We just have Algebra 1 and that’s it.”

Those challenges made applying to college this year more stressful. Because Hernandez is still improving his English and the American university system is foreign to him—his mother studied nursing, but his father never attended a higher learning institution—finding specific information on the admissions process was a particularly complex obstacle.

“Getting information was really hard. I couldn’t find anything,” Hernandez said. “And so I just had to keep looking. I just feel like since I don’t know the teachers that much and I don’t really talk to them, [I can’t ask for their help].”

Hernandez has been struggling with the lengthy written portions required in undergraduate admissions applications.

“I’m almost finished with my [college]

essay,” Hernandez said. “[I worked on it] for an hour once every two days, but it still took me like four weeks to finish it.”

Hernandez is applying to NOVA, and he plans to transfer to George Mason University after completing his first two years of undergraduate studies. He hopes to follow in his older brother’s footsteps and become a real estate broker.

His mother is a driving force behind his decision to apply for college. In an effort to make her proud, Hernandez continues to persevere.

“Even if it’s really hard, [she tells me to] just go in and ask for help, and to not be nervous,” Hernandez said. “She always tells me to not give up on school.”



BREAKING BARRIERS — Axel Hernandez searches for books at the McLean library. To overcome the language barrier and expand his vocabulary, he enjoys reading English books. (Photo by Aleena Gul)

“IT WAS REALLY HARD AT FIRST SINCE I DIDN’T KNOW ANY ENGLISH. I JUST KNEW SOME BASIC WORDS. IT WAS REALLY HARD MAKING FRIENDS AND TALKING TO TEACHERS. IN MY [FRESHMAN] YEAR [AT MCLEAN] WHEN A TEACHER TALKED TO ME, I COULDN’T UNDERSTAND ANYTHING.”

- AXEL HERNANDEZ
SENIOR

FINDING MOTIVATION — Kiara Portillo reads a comic sketchbook created by her older sister. She looks up to her sister, who is currently a student at Brigham Young University. (Photo by Aleena Gul)

KIARA PORTILLO FIRST-GEN AMERICAN OVERCOMES FINANCIAL BURDENS

HANNA BOUGHANEM MANAGING EDITOR
ARIANA ELAHI DESIGN EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

When junior Kiara Portillo's parents first crossed the U.S.-Mexico border on foot, they never could have imagined the challenges their daughter would face later on in life. Raised by a single mother as a first-generation American, Portillo has faced more adversity in the past 16 years than most experience in their entire lives.

"My dad grew up [in El Salvador] and he didn't even graduate high school; he stopped at sixth grade because he was poor, even though he was very smart," she said. "And [because of financial reasons], my mom didn't finish high school either."

Portillo's relationship with her family is complicated. Her parents are now divorced, and her father recently returned to El Salvador.

"My dad doesn't really pay child support [because] he is very broke," Portillo said. "So [now my mother is] just a single mom, and she works as a janitor."

Since immigrating, Portillo's family has faced enormous financial burdens. As a result, Portillo often feels limited in her options for post-secondary education.

"[I plan to pay for college] by going to a college that is cheaper," she said. "Even if I don't want to go to the college itself, it's just more reliable [and realistic]."

Portillo has been applying for scholarships to make college a more attainable goal, but the applications themselves are time-consuming.

"[My parents] might try to help me, but I had to work very hard in school for those scholarships," Portillo said. "I feel like I can't relax or get a break. There is so much pressure to go to college and to do stuff that my mom or dad couldn't do."

At times, Portillo is resentful of her situation. In a country where success is often determined by socioeconomic status, she feels perpetually left behind and wishes she could afford the same opportunities as her peers.

"I am always at a disadvantage. If there's a subject that I'm very bad at, I can't get tutoring because I'm not privileged like that, and it's very frustrating," she said. "I feel jealous [because] I wish I had [what others have]. It's really hard to stay positive."

Currently, Portillo is part of the special education program at McLean. As a result, her core classes are preselected for her, and she doesn't

have the opportunity to take any Advanced Placement (AP) courses. In McLean's hyper-competitive academic atmosphere, Portillo feels incredibly overwhelmed.

"I [have] a very slow short-term memory, and I can't retain information [easily]," she said. "Sometimes I do feel a little dumb, [especially when I see] people taking AP classes and [excelling] in them. Why can I not do that?"

Not only has Portillo's first-generation status left her without access to vital information, it has prevented her from developing the same family ties as her peers.

"I feel very left out because I never had a special connection to my cousins [and extended family], and it's kind of lonely," she said. "My [immediate] family is kind of the only thing I have."

For Portillo, college is the most direct path to success. She hopes to achieve what her parents never could.

"You can't quit," she said. "You have to finish school because you can't quit."

"I FEEL LIKE I CAN'T RELAX OR GET A BREAK. THERE IS SO MUCH PRESSURE TO GO TO COLLEGE AND TO DO STUFF THAT MY MOM OR DAD COULDN'T DO." - KIARA PORTILLO JUNIOR

A PORTRAIT TO REMEMBER — Kiara Portillo carries a portrait her father drew of her. During bad days, she looks at this drawing to reminisce about her childhood. (Photo by Aleena Gul)

EMELI CONTRERAS-TORRES JUNIOR HELPS FAMILY NAVIGATE LIFE IN U.S.

HANNA BOUGHANEM MANAGING EDITOR

For most McLean students, juggling school and extracurriculars is difficult in and of itself. For junior Emeli Contreras-Torres, it's just one extra challenge on top of a mountain of responsibilities.

"I consider myself the leader in my house because [I have] to help my parents [in many ways], especially with important documents," she said. "They send me papers, and I have to help them understand what they're about."

Born into a family of Mexican immigrants, Contreras is already a first-generation American and will soon be a first-generation college student. As the only fluent English speaker in her home, she has to devote much of her time to helping her parents navigate American life. With this role comes unimaginable pressure.

"Sometimes, I feel like I can't do it," Contreras said. "I [become] upset with myself when I don't understand [something I need to translate] even though I can read it, and it's very frustrating. And then it just feels like I have to get it faster so I can help my parents."

Since the start of the pandemic, the Contreras family has faced repeated health scares, which has only increased her burden. She had to fight hard to help her family find the support they needed.

"We all got COVID, and [my] mom was trying to find help," Contreras said.

"I had to try to translate for her and explain our situation

[because] she couldn't. [I had to] ask for help and figure out ways to help our family."

After watching her parents face these kinds of obstacles throughout her life, Contreras decided from a young age that she wanted to pursue a college education. Unfortunately, her path to higher education has been riddled with obstacles. Without an inherent understanding of the American system, she often feels helpless and alone in the process.

"[My parents] try to help me as much as they can, but they don't know how," she said. "I want to go to college, and they [want me to go too], but it's just so much that it's hard to figure [everything] out."

Contreras has had to work through much of the process on her own, from scholarship applications to financial aid papers. She often wishes she had an adult at home to turn to for answers.

"I guess I feel a little jealous of [kids who are not first-gen]," Contreras said. "They have more knowledge because their parents went through [higher education], and it's going to be much easier for them to do all those applications or get help from their parents [when] filling it out."

Sometimes, the pressure becomes so overwhelming that quitting seems like the only option.

"I do have those thoughts sometimes when homework gets so overwhelming, or I just feel so stressed about everything that I just [want] to stop this and not continue," she said. "[But] I know if I do it, I'm not just letting



FIRST-YEAR FESTIVITIES — Emeli Contreras celebrates her birthday with family and friends. She is a first-generation American born to Mexican immigrants. (Photo courtesy of Emeli Contreras-Torres)

myself down, I'm letting my family down."

When faced with roadblocks, Contreras has learned to make use of the resources available at McLean, including the CPP and weekly newsletters.

"[The CPP] really is [helpful] because I get to learn about different colleges and scholarships," she said. "I've met some people through there that are also first-generation, which is very helpful because I don't feel like I'm the only one that doesn't know these things."

Though she finds the help reassuring, Contreras wishes the information was extended to her family members as well.

"I really want to study abroad, and I want my parents to be more informed about that. I want them to feel included with the process and have more knowledge about what I'm going to be doing and how long it takes," she said.

Resilience is a recurring theme in Contreras' life. In spite of her circumstances, she has ambitious plans, starting with college.

"[When] I learned that I can do two years [of community college] and then transfer [to a public university], it became my plan," Contreras said. "It's going to be easier on my parents financially, and on me too. It's something I need to do, not just for myself, but for my family."

A MEANINGFUL MEMENTO — Emeli Contreras wears a necklace she received from her father for her quinceañera, the traditional Mexican celebration of a girl's 15th birthday. (Photo by Aleena Gul)





RESILIENCE FROM HER ROOTS
— Sofia Silva de Araújo admires a handmade bracelet that her Brazilian grandmother made for her. When faced with prejudice, her bracelet provides comfort. (Photo by Aleena Gul)

SOFIA SILVA DE ARAÚJO THE DOUBLE STANDARDS OF DIVERSITY

ALEENA GUL EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Diversity is a buzzword for college admissions. But for junior Sofia Silva de Araújo, most talk about diversity and inclusion feels disingenuous.

“Most people didn’t know I was Brazilian,” Silva de Araújo said. “I was too afraid to tell them because people can be so judgmental sometimes. Hiding my own identity was the only way that I thought I could protect myself.”

Silva de Araújo moved from Brazil to the U.S. in 2019. She was unfamiliar with the U.S. college application process and turned to college fairs to seek answers. Her presence, however, was met with silence.

“I had a lot of questions for a college but the college neglected all [of them],” Silva de Araújo said. “[The admissions officer] was trying to get my [Asian] friend to come to the college, and [my friend] wasn’t interested, but I was. He wouldn’t answer my questions because he knew my background. He was like, ‘You’re just not fit for our college.’ That was really frustrating.”

Her experience at the fair made her question the long-standing rhetoric colleges use to attract new applicants.

“Adults that have been helping me with college have been saying, ‘No, they value diversity,’” Silva de Araújo said. “But when

that [college fair incident] happened to me, I thought, ‘Where’s the diversity here? Do you really value diversity?’ Because I didn’t feel like I was valued.”

The combination of prejudice and lack of resources make it difficult for Silva de Araújo to stay afloat in the process. She often feels judged by those around her.

“One barrier that I faced was just getting the courage to walk up to my counselor or talk to someone about college,” Silva de Araújo said. “I feel like every step of the way someone’s going to judge me because I don’t know this or it’s all my fault because I’m not from here. At the same time, it feels like an obligation. ‘You live in America now, you got to know how the system works.’”

Silva de Araújo, like many other minority students, is forced to face deep-rooted stereotypes against minority ethnic groups on a daily basis.

“I think there’s a stereotype going around with just Latina women in general,” Silva de Araújo said. “[People] think that we’re just not smart enough, we can’t achieve anything and we’re just going to get low-life jobs. Some teachers and colleges have seen me as that kind of girl who doesn’t fight hard and doesn’t study, but I’m completely the opposite.”



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**- SOFIA SILVA DE ARAÚJO
JUNIOR**

In 2020, Silva de Araújo visited her home in Brazil and found it to be an enlightening experience in her battle against racial stigma.

“After I traveled back to my country, I had a chance to reconnect with my origins and with my family,” Silva de Araújo said. “I realized that it doesn’t matter where I come from as long as I’m trying my best and as long as I know my worth as a woman and as a student.”

Many first-generation student immigrants try to assimilate into mainstream American society yet retain their racial identity and cultural roots. Today, Silva de Araújo values her ethnicity and hopes to become a developmental behavioral pediatrician in the future.

“I’ve come a long way and I’m really proud of myself,” Silva de Araújo said. “Sometimes, I cannot help but to feel like I am nothing and to feel like it’s always going to be like this—a Latina woman is always going to be criticized and have stereotypical ideas around her.”

PETER AWABDEH

MCLEAN GRADUATE BEGINS COLLEGE AS A FIRST-GEN STUDENT

SAEHEE PEREZ CHIEF MARKETING MANAGER | OMAR KAYALI ONLINE OPINIONS EDITOR

McLean Class of 2021 graduate Peter Awabdeh is proof that first-generation college applicants are capable of navigating the college admissions process.

“Both of my parents immigrated [to the U.S.] from Syria, so they were not familiar at all with the college applications process,” Awabdeh said. “I was kind of the experiment in my family because I was the oldest one.”

Awabdeh found applying for financial aid to be especially complicated.

“Navigating through FAFSA was a bit difficult, as I had difficulty answering the questions,” Awabdeh said. “I [felt lost] at a few points. Sometimes, I was really confused with a lot of the terminology.”

Awabdeh’s limiting financial situation

narrowed down his options because many schools didn’t offer the scholarships and aid packages he would need in order to pay for college.

“I had to find schools that fit my family’s income range. That was really difficult because I couldn’t really go anywhere out of state,” Awabdeh said. “I was also only considering local schools I can commute [to], in order to actually have something affordable.”

While resources were available for Awabdeh, finding those resources proved difficult. Often, he was the one doing most of the research.

“I really didn’t understand who would be the best person to ask for help in certain situations,” Awabdeh said. “I was the one contacting people [and] asking around... I really didn’t find that many resources that reached out directly to me.”

Awabdeh’s main points of contact in McLean were his guidance counselor, Amber Simpkins, and McLean’s college and career specialist, Laura Venos. He directed questions regarding the Common App and sending school credits to them.

“Ms. Simpkins provided me with a lot of resources, especially toward navigating the Common App and helping me develop a resume for my schools,” Awabdeh said. “Ms. Venos provided really quick help whenever I had questions regarding my AP credits, sending my SAT scores and issues I had with schools that didn’t use the Common App.”

Despite all the challenges, Awabdeh never lost his motivation to get into college, and his efforts paid off. In March 2021, Awabdeh received news from the Posse Foundation that he was accepted to William & Mary with a full-

tuition scholarship. The foundation partners with colleges and universities to provide scholarships to those with extraordinary leadership potential.

“I received a call back from one of the staff members [after the finalist interview] and they told me they have one final question, which ended up being a surprise to tell me I received the scholarship,” Awabdeh said. “I was on the brink of tears when I found out the news and I was like, ‘No way.’”

In retrospect, Awabdeh is proud of his high school accomplishments and what they led to.



I WAS KIND OF THE EXPERIMENT IN MY FAMILY BECAUSE I WAS THE OLDEST ONE.”

**- PETER AWABDEH
MCLEAN GRADUATE**

“Growing up and thinking about how I couldn’t attend the schools I wanted because of a lack of experience with the college admissions process as a first-generation college student made me discouraged,” Awabdeh said. “These past 13 years of hard work, sleepless nights and academic achievement finally [felt] validated as I received the news from Posse.”

Awabdeh thinks first-generation students should stay calm and persevere through the application season despite the extra obstacles they face.

“Definitely don’t stress out,” Awabdeh said. “There’s always a plan... It might be difficult to navigate, and you might feel at times that you’re not fit for it, but it’s really necessary to push through.”



IT’LL WORK OUT — Peter Awabdeh visits William & Mary in June after receiving a full tuition scholarship following a months-long application process. (Photo courtesy of Peter Awabdeh)