

I am First Generation, but I am Not my Guilt

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“I don’t want to go into the family business.” I still remember uttering those words to my mother the day I changed my major. Words filled with profound emotion. In that moment, I was struggling to find my own path and bridge the gap between two different worlds: the pull of the small town I had grown up in, and the new identity I was forming through my college experience. My growth as a student also implied loss: a disconnect in my relationship with family as I entered a world they didn’t understand. For myself, and so many other first generation college students, it felt like I was living a double life (Lamar, 2015). There was no conceivable way to connect those two parts of my identity. I was determined to make my family proud by being the first to go to college, but I felt I was losing them and a part of myself along the way. My struggle was just the beginning.

At the time, I did not realize I was experiencing what researchers call “breakaway guilt.” First generation students who experience this phenomenon often feel strong emotional ties to their immediate family and leaving them to pursue higher education is equivalent to betrayal or abandonment (London, 1989). I had spent every summer growing up helping my mother and grandmother at work. Leaving to pursue a field of my choosing felt like I was deserting those I loved most. When I told my mother I didn’t want to go into the family business, I was saying I didn’t want to be a part of what she and my grandmother had spent much of their lives working for. How could I leave them behind after they had raised me for 18 years? I wanted to make them proud, but leaving them behind to pursue my own dreams felt selfish.

As a first generation student, college can often be a lonely road. We want to make our families proud by going to college, but feel an intense guilt for leaving them behind. The disconnect and guilt I felt for leaving my family behind began to merge with the shame surrounding my status as a first generation student. When I had that conversation with my mother, I knew I was about to fail one of my first classes of college and was too scared to tell her. I wanted to make my family proud, but I felt like a complete disappointment. If I failed, I had left them behind for nothing. I had so many unanswered questions. What happens if I fail this class? Will I lose my financial aid? I was too proud to ask for help, too ashamed my friends or professors would look at me differently because of my first generation status. I didn’t want pity. I wanted to be like everyone else.

Thankfully, a professor noticed the change in my behavior and brought me in her office one day to make sure everything was okay. I broke down in tears as I told her I was going to fail. She helped me talk with financial aid to ensure I wouldn’t lose my scholarship, directed me to tutoring, and listened. She connected me with resources on campus to help me find other first generation students. It took one person helping me to start the cycle of understanding I was not the only one experiencing this struggle. Through conversations with other staff and community members, I began to see my first generation status as a point of pride. Being first generation gave me a sense of determination and drive setting me apart from my peers.

Ultimately, I was successful as a first generation college student because of those who invested in me, challenged me, and never let me give up on my college journey; the faculty and staff who continuously reminded me that grit, determination, and tenacity were the greatest gifts I possessed. I know now pursuing my education did not change who I am. I am proud to have attended an institution known for serving first generation and minority students, as I know that experience resulted in where I am today. I'm still a girl from a small town in North Carolina who loves her family and has never forgotten her roots. Pursuing my educational goals never changed my identity. It made me a better version of myself.

I am not my guilt. I am a first generation graduate. I am the product of grit, tenacity, and determination. I make a difference.

References

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