

# After a Progressive K-12 Education... Then What? First Gen Youth Voices on the Transition to College

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**A**nalisa, a second year student at a four-year university, sits across from me, eyes sparkling as she animatedly describes the projects she worked on when she was a student at High Tech High's Chula Vista campus. She is particularly proud of her class's work with the St. Jude's radio-thon-fundraiser where her enthusiasm, natural leadership abilities, and bilingual fluency helped her make significant contributions to the larger San Diego community. She reflects, "In high school, I was so passionate and driven about anything that we were talking about in the classroom and anything that had to do with how it connected to the outside world that I just naturally took on this position of being a leader."

Analisa credits the project-based approach and the close relationships fostered in the her high school community with helping her to find her voice and her strength. She recalls being shy and quiet in her traditional elementary and middle school, and explains, "I think that HTH has such a different way of teaching their students that really allows for them to kind of discover themselves and I believe that's how education should be. This kind of like self discovery along the way. As

you are learning, you are learning about yourself as well as the world around you.”

When asked about current projects and activities, however, Analisa’s face clouds. A first generation college student, she had arrived at university with great expectations, self-confidence and enthusiasm to take on the world. But two years in, reality has not met with her expectations. She often finds herself disconnected, with classes that can feel irrelevant, faculty and advisors who are distant, and peers who don’t understand the pressures that she faces as a commuter student living at home and struggling to balance academic classes with family and work obligations.

Reflecting on the person she was in high school and how she has changed since coming to college Analisa states, “since coming to college I haven’t seen that Analisa, the leadership Analisa, because I’m not involved in any extra-curriculars and there’s not a lot of group work in my courses or times where I can go into the community and show them like hey this is what I’m learning. So I definitely feel like you know, sometimes, where has that Analisa gone? Is she still there? Where can I find her? Because I do miss her. I miss feeling like I could be a capable leader.”

Unfortunately, Analisa’s story isn’t unique. Over the past several months as part of a larger research project looking at the transition between high school and college for first generation students, we’ve interviewed numerous graduates of High Tech High and other progressive schools who are currently enrolled in two- or four-year colleges and universities in the greater San Diego region. Like Analisa, all of these first-generation students began their higher education experience with great expectations; all were recognized by their high school teachers and counselors as having great promise; and all had participated in one-to-one and group mentoring sessions designed to prepare them for the transition to college. Yet, despite all of the strengths they brought with them as they transitioned into higher education, most have hit significant roadblocks that have caused them to question themselves, their academic abilities, and their future potential.

Another HTH graduate, also in her second year of college, shared the questions and doubts she had experienced in her transition to university—“My first semester I failed my algebra class and it was

just horrible. And then all those questions would come up about is she going to stay? Or even to myself I was like, well do I want to stay? Is this for me? You see all your other friends dropping out after the first semester, even more after the second semester, the first year. And it just becomes a thing of do I belong here? Or am I just another, am I first generation for a reason? Do I just belong working for the family? Should I just be finding myself another job? Maybe education isn’t my thing.”

As progressive K-12 educators, where do these quotes leave us? We resist the drive toward a test-prep curriculum in our schools, because it doesn’t build the skills and dispositions we believe are most important in life: engagement, curiosity, creativity, critical thinking, communication, problem solving. The one metric we want to be judged on is whether our students apply, gain acceptance, and succeed in college. Despite all the doomsaying in the popular media about the end of college as we know it, most of us still believe that a four year college or university education is the gateway to the middle class. It sets up more lifetime opportunities for our students than they might gain through any other path. We feel this especially strongly for our first generation students, young people whose parents have not completed college.

Although each first generation college student’s journey is distinct, there are some commonalities across the student accounts that deserve attention and raise questions for educators concerned about supporting student success and committed to equity for first generation students.

### Continued Dominance of Traditional Pedagogy

“Americans have long been told that our colleges and universities are the best in the world. It turns out that when it comes to college student learning, we are decidedly mediocre.”

—Kevin Carey, *The end of college: Creating the future of learning and the university of everywhere*, p.10

HTH graduates stress the importance of the real world learning and the personalization they experienced in high school. Yet the stark differences in pedagogy that they encounter in college raise questions for them. After the hands-on, personalized learning experiences that they encountered through the project-based approach to learning in

high school, the traditional lectures and exams that continue to dominate in many of their college courses can come as a shock. For some, the traditional approach of college coursework can lead to achievement challenges, especially as this approach requires study skills, such as note-taking during lectures, textbook reading, and memorization, that may not have been prioritized in their high school classes. For others, the traditional approach can raise questions about the premise of the work and the value of the courses—if theory is not connected to practice, what is the point of the work?

In the words of first generation students...

*In college I feel like I'm sitting in a class and I'm learning about stuff that I don't feel like I'm ever going to need.*

*I feel like in college there's a lot of lecture, lecture, lecture and you don't really get anything out of it.*

*College professors go so fast with things that I can't really retain the information as well as I guess some other students are used to because they went to high schools where they were used to having lectures every day.*

*So many of my classes were so boring. I felt like each class that I took contributed to me just saying you know I'm not going to go to school today, I'm just going to skip all my classes, and you know you kind of have to go to class to do well on your exams and I wasn't going to class so I didn't do well on my exams. I ended up getting three Cs and an F that semester.*

*For my first semester I kept on falling asleep in class. It isn't that I wasn't there to learn. It's just that I was so bored that I kept on falling asleep.*

#### Disconnect from a Campus Community

“We know one thing for certain: Students who are actively engaged in educationally purposeful activities and experiences, both inside and outside the classroom, are more likely than their disengaged peers to persist through to graduation.”

—Shaun R. Harper & Stephen John Quaye, *Student engagement in higher education: Theoretical perspectives*

*and practical approaches for diverse populations*, p. 4.

Pedagogy is political and it is personal too. Many students' responses to a lecture format and de-contextualized learning in college is not only to feel bored, as one might expect, but to feel personally devalued as well. Research on academic mindsets (Farrington, 2013) posits that “a sense of belonging” is a critical factor in students' ability to persevere through academic difficulty.

In addition to impersonal pedagogy, limited advising resources and the fact that for both cultural and financial reasons, many of the first generation students we interviewed are not living on campus with peers, campus environments often feel distant and disconnected. Although one of the potential benefits of going to college, particularly a residential college, can be the “cultural capital” (Bourdieu, 1977) that may be gained from the informal connections outside of class, most of our interviews revealed significant isolation for the first generation students who commute to and from campus only to sit in class among peers who are virtual strangers.

In the words of first generation students...

*Going back to HTH, like I said, the teachers really invested their time in you and really cared about you. So college was a hard transition. In my math class specifically, the professor made it clear that she did not care whether I failed or I passed...*

*In so many of my classes I feel like I'm just a number.*

*It's really hard. It's really hard. Particularly because everyone lives together and as soon as they get here they have a friend. They have a roommate and for me because I am a commuter it was more like I'm just here to go to class. I'm just here to go study in the library. I'm not here to go to the dining hall for dinner and hang out with all of my friends. I feel like I'm having a way different college experience than the people that live here.*

*I just haven't had anyone or met anyone on campus who I feel some kind of guidance from. I feel like I am on my own.*

*I definitely thought college was going to be a lot different than it is.... It hurts that I don't have that many friends here and it is really unfortunate but at the same time I know why I am here. So, I don't know. It's a lot different than what I thought it would be and it's not a bad thing it's just I know I'm not having the same experience as everyone else is and that sucks.*

## Financial Pressures

“In the ten years after 1997, the inflation-adjusted cost of a year of college at the average public university rose by 30 percent, while the earning power of a bachelor's degree remained roughly the same.”

—Clayton Christensen and Henry Eyring, *The innovative university: Changing the DNA of higher education from the inside out*, p. 13

For many of the first generation students we spoke with, decisions about where to go to college, whether or not to live on campus, and even what to major in are driven by financial pressures. Affording the ever-increasing cost of a four-year degree drove some students to opt for two-year community college as a way to get general education requirements “out of the way” prior to (hopefully) transferring to a four-year degree program. Concern about avoiding student debt caused others to take on more units per semester so that they could graduate early. Students who were interviewed also chose to live at home and work multiple part-time jobs to reduce costs and help supplement grants, loans, and parent contributions for tuition. Several students were majoring in areas such as business or accounting, which they perceived as more likely to ensure a job post-college.

These financial pressures exacerbated other academic concerns and further segregated these first generation students from their more economically advantaged peers. Working multiple jobs and living at home cut students off from the campus community. Taking an overload of course units and electing a major that might seem economically advantageous but didn't drive students' passions resulted in lower grades that risk limiting future academic as well as career opportunities. And the constant stress associated with

financial pressures caused some to question the value of their university experience.

In the words of first generation students...

*Not all the decisions that I've made at college have been financial ones but I can't say that the money issues haven't held me back.*

*I was on scholarship but even paying for half of the tuition was really rough. I had to work two jobs and I would work you know 30 hours a week and go to school full time at the same time. I had no free time at all. That was really rough.*

*It's like, you're going to this school because it has a good name but you are doing the same thing that you would at a community college, which is just commute, go home, not really talk to anyone. It makes me wonder if it is worth the cost.*

## Bringing K-12 Innovation to Higher Education

“A moral imperative exists in higher education. Yes, higher education needs to be more competitive and more cost conscious. But, ultimately, a more innovative postsecondary industry will increase access to higher education, create a better educated workforce, and enable more individuals to participate fully in the democratic public sphere.”

—Dominic J. Brewer and William G. Tierney, “Barriers to innovation in U.S. higher education” in *Reinventing higher education: The promise of innovation*, p. 14.

Although Analisa can cite example after example of childhood friends and former classmates who have dropped out of school, she remains confident that she will graduate despite the challenges she is encountering in college. Data from the National Student Data Clearinghouse shows that across demographic groups, High Tech High alumni graduate from college at a rate significantly above the national and statewide average. Analisa expresses thanks to former high school teachers and counselors who gave her the confidence to go meet with professors, who advised her on what classes to take in her freshman year, and who continue to provide moral support via email and texts when she is struggling.

Most of the first generation students that we interviewed expressed similar determination to stick it out and graduate from college. But as we heard story after story, we increasingly worried about the difficulty of the transition. What was making it so hard? Was the problem that students weren't adequately equipped to survive in a traditional college world? Were they not receiving enough support in the transition to college? And if the transition was this hard for students from HTH—students who had graduated from high school with grit and determination, self-awareness and self-advocacy skills—what about the other students, who were coming from more traditional schools where development of these non-cognitive skills is typically less of a priority?

One student, when asked what he would change about his education expressed that although he had loved his high school experience in a progressive, project-based environment, he sometimes wished that he had had a more traditional secondary experience so that he would be better prepared to “endure college classes.” Although we understood the thinking behind this observation, the use of that word “endure” was both telling and troubling.

As K-12 educators a significant part of our job is to prepare students for success in higher education. But as progressive educators, it is worth questioning the type of higher education for which we are preparing students. Is the challenge that we need to prepare students to conform to the expectations of traditional higher education? Or do we need to work with higher education to rethink how to make learning relevant and accessible for an increasingly diverse student body? In the midst of increasing calls for more affordable college cost structures, concerns about student loans, and questions about the readiness of college graduates to meet the employment demands of the workforce, we need to actively engage in a re-consideration of the structure and purpose of teaching and learning in higher education to ensure that it is meeting the needs of our graduates. The work that HTH and other progressive K-12 schools are doing can serve as a catalyst for re-imagining how teaching and learning happens at all levels of education.

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