

Conversation Starters with Your First-Generation College Student

By Stephanie Neve and Grace Dong

Somehow, 22 years have passed since I started my journey at Simpson College as a first year first-year, first generation student. I'll never forget how proud my mom was. But underneath that pride, I also knew she struggled with how to talk to me about college, and that was hard for the both of us. Her experience with education was completely different than mine since she attended cosmetology school as an adult which made it difficult for us to understand each other.

She'd ask me "How is school going?" and "Are you getting good grades?" and I'd always answer, but the conversations never went any further. I started college with the intention of majoring in Music Education, but after I switched to Religion, our conversations were even more shallow than before. She didn't know how to help me with any of my schoolwork or navigating the college environment. I still have a distinct memory of the time I called her, overwhelmed, because I didn't know how to drop a class. My advisor told me that I just needed to go fill out a form at the Registrar's office, but I had no idea what a 'registrar' even was. Plagued by intense imposter syndrome, I nodded, pretending I understood and said "Ok, I'll do that" afraid to ask for further assistance. I instantly called my mom after and she said, "Honey, I don't know what that is either and I don't know how to help you." I remember the silence after that – both of us were teary – me feeling like I didn't belong, and her for feeling powerless.

As time went on it just became harder and harder for us to talk about my college experience. Though I didn't want to exclude her from my journey, I know she felt left out from this new world I was entering. Now, as the Director of TRIO Student Support Services, I work with first-generation college students facing the same challenges. I invited one of our students, Grace, who is a senior now to contribute to this article. Here is what she shared:

"Entering college as a first-generation student from a different culture, I had no idea what to expect. My only reference was what I'd seen in movies, which, as we all know, is far from reality. I began to experience imposter syndrome, though I didn't recognize it at the time. Navigating school became an overwhelming challenge, and I was struggling in so many areas in life. The weight on my shoulders was immense, and there were moments I longed to confide in my parents.

I never expected them to fully grasp what I was going through—they weren't from this country, and their education ended in middle school back in Burma. But still, I wished they would ask about my day, my school life, or how I was truly doing. My professors, noticing

my struggles, showed concern and checked in on me. Yet, despite their kindness, I could never open up to them in the way I so deeply wished I could with my own parents.

If they had asked me these questions, I believe it would have been beneficial not only for me but for them as well. For them to be involved in my life could've helped them help me. I strongly encourage all parents with students to ask questions, even the simplest ones. These questions can have a profound impact on our lives, demonstrating your interest and support.”

So together we've come up with some conversation starters to help you connect with your students. You don't need much background knowledge, but these can make a world of difference in staying connected to their journey.

- What has been the hardest part of college so far? Is there anything I can do to help?
- Have you taken any classes that you've really enjoyed? If so, ask them to tell you about it.
- Tell me about the friends you've made? How did you meet them?
- How are things going with your roommate?
- Have you gotten involved in any clubs on campus?
- What do you do in your free time?
- What are you enjoying most about college?
- How is college different from high school?
- Have you explored the resources available to you at Simpson? Like tutoring, counseling, Career Development, or TRIO?
- How are you doing financially?

It probably goes without saying, but I don't recommend asking these all at once in a firing squad fashion, but hopefully this will help you have a deeper and more meaningful conversation with your college student!