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The Challenge to be First

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The Challenge to be First

First-generation students find growing support to help them clear the many obstacles they face.

Stories by KATE ARTHUR



Cole (above) stands next to a mural in the Hansen Student Center that includes a photo of the late Edelbert Rodgers '33, who was himself a first-generation student and later received an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters from IWU for his achievements as a scholar and educator.

As a first-generation student, Christy Cole '16 says she's always felt support from Illinois Wesleyan's faculty and staff. But she also saw how many of her peers were reluctant to ask for help or admit feeling lost.

That sense of confusion and isolation may begin before first-generation students arrive on campus. (Generally a student is considered "first generation" if neither parent graduated from college.) Lacking the support of someone at home who has been through the experience, students may be deterred by the college application process itself.

Once in college, they may find they are less prepared academically and can struggle socially, finding it hard to fit in or feeling they don't belong. They're also more likely to face serious financial hurdles.

Because Cole, a philosophy major from Freeport, Ill., knows firsthand the tough challenges these students often face, she decided to help. Last fall, she launched IWU FIRST, a registered student organization designed to give direction, support and encouragement to first-generation students.

Cole discovered that many others on campus wanted to help. After sending emails to faculty asking if they'd be interested in mentoring students, she was amazed by the response. "It was an emotional day for me when all these emails flooded my inbox," she says, adding many faculty members said they were first-generation too.

While first-generation students comprise an increasing percentage of the student bodies at U.S. colleges and universities, they are also more likely to drop out than peers whose parents have college degrees. However, those attrition rates are lower for students who attend private institutions like Illinois Wesleyan. According to the University's Admissions Office, 15.1 percent of the new domestic students entering this fall will be first generation.

First-generation students share a sense of pride along with a strong drive to persevere, says Cole. But they also need to be reminded "that you are not alone on your college journey."

Cole knows that many Wesleyan students who aren't first generation share that same need. IWU FIRST is open to any student interested in attending the biweekly meetings. Topics addressed include financial aid, scholarships, study habits, time management and volunteer opportunities. Sometimes faculty, staff or community professionals stop by to speak.

Meetings typically start with a casual discussion about what happened that week. "Sometimes it's that they felt embarrassed or confused about something," Cole says, "and we talk about it." While the tone can be serious, "we also have a lot of fun," she adds.

The University has many ongoing programs that indirectly benefit prospective and current first-generation students. Karla Carney-Hall, vice president of student affairs and dean of students, notes that in recent years the campus has grown in diversity, and the campus community has responded. Reaching out to first-generation students is another step.

"It's part of our natural evolution of becoming a much more diverse place," says Carney-Hall. "We really just need to continue to look for ways to help make sure students feel supported. First-generation students certainly have the ability to be successful; they just don't necessarily have the insider's knowledge of how things work or how to access support and opportunities."

Cole is teaming with Carney-Hall and staff in Alumni Relations, Admissions and Multicultural Student Affairs to expand IWU FIRST in the coming academic year. On Sept. 4, a new mentoring program will be launched during a FIRST Generation Mixer. The event's purpose, say Cole, is to match faculty, staff and other supporters with students "who do not necessarily have a home support system or just would like an on-campus connection, confidant and mentor to go to."

Cole points out how important it is for first-generation students to have a relationship with someone who not only supports their college experience but who knows what is needed to help them succeed.

"For these students who have no support at home, or negative support, they need someone," she says. "If they can get access to programs, assistance, outreach and support, that would make them a traditional college student, almost. That's what we want."

Editor's Note: Alumni interested in serving as mentors to IWU first-generation students can learn more about the group by visiting its Facebook page.

Four first-generation IWU students spoke candidly about the challenges and changes they faced in the course of their college journeys. Links to their stories are below:

Read about Chaunta Love

Read about Luis Cabrales

Read about Jonathan McBride

Read about Rachel Wimberly