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Bridging the Gap: First Gen Latinx Students and their Parents’ Journey through Higher Education at UC Berkeley

Student’s Perspectives on Navigating Higher Ed Alongside their Parents



Photo by Elena Zhukova on [UC Berkeley Media Library: Students](#).

By Shanti Danielle Dorado

The importance of getting first generation students from marginalized communities into higher education is widely known. At the UC Berkeley campus in the Fall of 2024, [around a quarter of all new students are Chicanx/Latinx](#), while a [little less of 1/3 of students are first generation](#). But once there, how do these students and their families explore this new experience *together*? When I asked UC Berkeley students how their relationships with their parents or guardians changed after starting college, they all described a similar sentiment: “distance only makes heart stronger” - but not without barriers that impacted their Berkeley experience. Over

the summer, I interviewed 4 UC Berkeley students who are either currently studying or graduated within the past 5 years - to study how students and their parents' journey through higher education for the first time.

“After my first year at Cal, going back home for the summer, that was interesting. [F]or the ..better part of the year, I had finally established and found..my independence. Now I’m back home and in [a] different position, with different dynamics - I’m trying to poke and push the boundaries of what I can [and] can’t do...I was figuring it out for the first time, and so were my parents.” - Alex

Alex is a first generation transfer student from Hayward, CA, and is the first of four to go to college. Because he was the oldest of 4, enforcing his new boundaries at home was scary - as the role model for his younger siblings, he didn’t want them to “revolt”. At the same time, he described feeling pressure to meet expectations despite being away from home - often being called out for not being home, going out more often, and spending less time with family in his first year.

“They’re just projecting what they think is possible for [low-income students] to achieve. That just motivated me to prove them wrong, not in a resentful way.. I needed that push of someone telling me to my face, “I don’t think you can do this”. - Jacqueline

Jacqueline, a 2022 Berkeley graduate, constantly faced pressure during her Berkeley experience to do well - especially because others constantly didn’t believe in her. She felt pressured to hide when she was struggling, especially from her parents, since she had a history of doing well in school and didn’t want to face criticism for struggling once at Berkeley.

Camila, a Cal student who graduated this past spring, recalled how while her parents knew the countless hours she spent studying in the library, they didn't understand the actual effort it took to succeed.

“Obviously [my parents] understand that school is very hard.. But they're very much like, my job.. Being a housekeeper, and a cook.. And the long hours is a lot harder than being a student. [I]n their eyes, like, you're sitting and reading and doing homework. But that's where I feel like it was underestimated.” - **Camila**

Like Camila, **Marco**, a rising junior studying Environmental Science, found that his family underestimated the effort that goes into his coursework. At first, they nagged him about focusing more, until they learned that he and four others in a group of seven failed a biology class - and that they were all first generation Latinx students.

“[I]n the beginning, [my mom] was kind of, like, skeptical.. “Why aren't you doing better in your classes?” And I'm like, this is a tough school.. [I]t took [her] time to understand that this is not gonna be like [my] sister's experience.” - **Marco**

Camila also spoke about the reality of feeling guilty about leaving her family behind to go to school, often neglecting her basic needs in order to prevent her parents from worrying. She described one summer where she was “basically starving” because she had no food and didn't qualify for EBT - but at the time, her dad was working 12 hours a day, and she didn't want to have to resort to asking him for money. Similarly, Alex also spoke about feeling guilty for trying

to enjoy his time at Berkeley, and Marco also described trying to do things himself to avoid being a “burden” to his family.

We can see that these challenges have real consequences, and it is up to schools to make sure students and their families are equipped to handle these changes. Despite there being [various mentoring, academic, and community programs](#) on campus, there are no such programs for students and families after they accept admission but before they begin classes. Orientation programs and workshops created specifically for families must be implemented for families to learn what college life is like, how to communicate about concerns and challenges, and so students can learn about essential resources. With these tools, students like Alex, Jacqueline, Camila, and Marco can speak about and work through their challenges successfully both at school and at home. After all, students aren’t stepping through campus gates alone, but instead with everyone that helped them get there.

Note: *I have used pseudonyms to protect the identities of all students mentioned in this piece.*

About the Author

Shanti Danielle Dorado (she/her) is a Sociology and intended Educational Sciences undergraduate student at the University of California, Berkeley.

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