First-Generation Students Aim High

Experiencing the transformational power of a Duquesne education

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THE HEART OF DUQUESNE BEATS FOR FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS

By Karen Ferrick-Roman

COLLEGE—A DOOR TO OPPORTUNITY.

In many minds, the way to a better life. Since Duquesne’s founding in 1878 to lift immigrants out of poverty through education, many generations of families have experienced the transformational power of a Duquesne education.

The University continues to draw students of all backgrounds and is still home to first-generation college students. These trailblazers in higher education for their families are 21st-century stewards of Duquesne’s 19th-century mission.

“These students are changing the path for the entire family,” says Debbie Zugates, director of undergraduate admissions, and a first-generation college graduate. Because of her experience, she knows the challenges facing these students and what can be done to make their transition to college easier.

“First-generation students and their parents walk in at a disadvantage,” acknowledges Zugates, who hosted a regional fair at Duquesne that unveiled the mysterious college process for about 300 first-generation applicants. “We don’t know what they don’t know, and we’ll do everything we can to help them.”

Though these students may have a learning curve when it comes to the college selection and application process, they tend to build a special relationship with the institution, its faculty and its staff.
CREATING A LEGACY FROM SQUARE ONE

Nobody announces they are the first in their family to be on a college campus when they meet with Jeff Mallory, director of the Office of Multicultural Affairs, and Adam Wasilko, director of Freshman Development. That salient fact becomes apparent only as relationships unfold—starting with Duquesne’s FAST program, when incoming freshmen and family members flock to Duquesne to acclimate to campus and tap the knowledge of Duquesne staff members.

“Over my six years of doing the FAST program, I can say paperwork is the biggest issue for first-generation college students,” says Wasilko, who tells new students to break paperwork into “have to do,” “smart to do” and “recommended.”

The FAST program offers students and parents one-on-one help with paperwork and helps calm general fears about college.

“Even before they get into finances, there are questions, like, ‘Am I even good enough to go to college?’” says Mallory. “You see a wide range of emotions and reactions.”

The FAST team keeps in mind the courage and sacrifices of first-generation students and their families—and knows FAST can offer a crystallizing moment.

“I think for many families, it affirms that they and their child have made the right decision to come to Duquesne,” says Wasilko. “They get to feel that transformational moment while they’re here. They feel the mission.”

He also strongly supports the “10-minute rule” for families struggling with questions: “Don’t stew over something for more than 10 minutes. Give us a call. We may not have the answers, but we will give you some options that maybe you haven’t thought of.”

Duquesne is unusual in having a full team of staff members from across campus smooth the way for incoming students. This personal attention contributes to a successful first year, as well as retention of students—a critical point when nationwide, three of five first-generation college students don’t complete their degrees in six years, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

Dr. Joseph McCormick, chair of Duquesne’s biological sciences...
year, he was working in McCormick’s lab. Now, he’s in overdrive, working on independent research, earning competitive national awards, receiving opportunities to present at national conferences and planning to write an honors thesis.

“He is a good lab citizen, interacts well with his peers and professors,” McCormick wrote in the Goldwater Scholar recommendation letter. He mentioned Resko’s mentoring of other undergraduates, his time management skills and the way he balances a work-study job with conducting independent research.

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“Having also been a first-generation university student, I appreciate how important it is to have a mentor to guide someone with the talent to realize they are truly competitive, can go as far as their talents will take them and can have a productive career in science,” McCormick wrote.

This is McCormick’s ultimate reward during his two decades of teaching. And many relatives who were never exposed to higher education don’t understand his vocation. At family reunions, one uncle quizzes McCormick:

“You’re a college professor right?”

“Yes,” McCormick assures him.

“Well,” says the uncle, “I can’t see it.”

Another relative once said, “I don’t understand. You went to college. You graduated. Why don’t you just get a job?”

These are examples of the kind of advice given when the process is foreign and isn’t well understood.

**ZACH RESKO**

Zach is not only the first in his family to attend college, but the first to set sights on a Ph.D.
by first-generation students, says McCormick.

“In science,” he explains, “you think about something we don’t know about, and then think about how to do it. When you’re starting out, you don’t even know what to look for and things don’t work out the way you thought they would.”

He saw Resko asking the right questions, running to his office to share the thrill of discovery—a thrill Resko shared with 10,000 other scientists when he presented at a national conference where Bill Gates gave the keynote address.

“Figuring it out for yourself is the big thing,” says McCormick, realizing that he is training Resko to become one of his peers.

“You get there—somehow.” McCormick sees that Resko’s confidence and skills are building along with his resume, and he’s in a place far from the scary college process and the even scarier national competitions. Resko swears that his younger sister will accomplish even more.

SUCCESS ROOTED IN DREAMS, EXPECTATIONS

From the time Julia Chabala, B’15, A’15, was in middle school, her parents started discussing careers with her and her younger brother, Alex. Their mother, Anna, escaped communism, emigrating from Serbia at the age of 12. She became a flight attendant after high school. Chabala’s father, Jack, served in the Vietnam War following his high school graduation and started his electrician’s business once he returned home.

Chabala grew up in rural southwestern Pennsylvania near the West Virginia border.

“It was the kind of town where there are maybe 800 people. We didn’t have next-door neighbors, streetlights or even a police station,” she says.

By the time Chabala was preparing for high school, her parents were willing to alternate living between two communities so their children could get a better public school education. In her senior year, Chabala stumbled through five college applications.

“My mother always said that the true measure of her ‘American Dream’ was for her children to graduate from college...”
destination was overwhelming, as it often is for first-generation students. She remembers applying to Duquesne.

“I remember like it happened yesterday: my mom received a postcard in the mail from Duquesne and said, ‘Hey, what do you think about Duquesne? It’s not exactly far, not exactly close.’ I never thought I’d get into Duquesne—ever,” says Chabala, who was shocked by her acceptance letter. Then reality set in.

“It was like the family was breaking up. It was hard on everybody. Nobody knew what to expect; nobody had left the nest before,” she says.

During her freshman year, Chabala met her dad for lunch every Wednesday.

“Toward the end of my freshman year, our weekly lunches stopped because he finally became comfortable,” says Chabala, who held leadership positions in social, honor and professional organizations throughout her undergraduate years. Before she graduated with two bachelor’s degrees in marketing and corporate communications, she landed a digital marketing job in Pittsburgh.

Only four years before, the Chabala family entered unknown territory. Now, the family can count one college graduate and another college student—Chabala’s brother attends college in Washington, D.C., and will be graduating in 2018.

“My mother always said that the true measure of her ‘American Dream’ was for her children to graduate from college,” says Chabala. “Now looking back, she sees it as the reason she came to this country—to leave her legacy.”
Brandon Keip didn’t start thinking about college until his junior year of high school. “I think because of events in my life, I was in a rut,” says Keip, whose father died when he was in fourth grade, which impacted other family relationships, especially with his mother. “Basically, there was a lot of family and social pressure to go to college,” says Keip, a sophomore liberal arts student majoring in international relations. “My mother wants the best for me; every mother wants the best for her children.”

Accepted into Duquesne’s Spiritan Division, which offers students with potential a chance to acclimate to college, Keip came to campus in the summer, making honors list, becoming the freshman class council president and president of his residence hall council. He found the perseverance to overcome obstacles thrown into his life’s path—partnered with an intense desire to help others. “I’m blessed,” says Keip, who credits his mother with helping him succeed. “I’m here at Duquesne, and it’s like a faith-based family. I still have a lot more ways to learn to get better as a student, but I believe I’m on the right path because I’m here at Duquesne. “I think going to Duquesne has made all the difference, with the resources and vast support. Because I am a first-generation college student, I want to take this education and use it to the fullest. There’s no way I can repay what they have done for me. I can only scratch at the surface, but I’m going to try to do that.”

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