

[HOST INTRO]: In the final installment of the Far From Home series, Texas Public Radio and education writer Bekah McNeel consider the importance of first-generation college students preserving their own identities and how that helps them feel a sense of belonging to their college communities.

[HOST TAG]: That's education writer Bekah McNeel reporting. The "Far From Home" series is funded by an Education Writers Association reporting fellowship.

[***FarFromHomePt5 TRT 04:22***]

On a bulletin board at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, New York, a flier advertised a special event -- first-generation students could share their college experiences in their own words.

It was part of a larger project led by Skidmore's senior associate dean of students, Luis Inoa. He spent the summer working with first-gen Skidmore students to figure out the best ways to help similar students at liberal arts colleges around the country. He discovered that storytelling can be very powerful.

LUIS INOA

[00:04:32] What research has shown us is that for first gen students or low income students, when they're able to see or hear from or read ways in which students struggled -- and then what skill sets they utilized to persist -- that they are not just able to see themselves, but they're able to recognize that they themselves have particular skills and assets that will allow them to persist. [21.6]

He created a story-sharing initiative at Skidmore. He calls it "Thoroughbred First," a reference to the college mascot.

Anjelica Espinoza, a first-gen student from San Antonio, didn't participate in the event, but she understands the need for it. She's part of Skidmore's Opportunity Program, which offers extra support to students with financial need.

ANJELICA at School

**[00:00:02] A lot of people at this school are. More on the wealthy side, who can afford to pay most of the tuition. Also we're also in upstate New York. This is where a lot of people have money. And those of those that can't really pay for everything on our own -- it's we're a slightly underrepresented group. [00:00:26][18.5]
[22.8]**

Still, she said, she feels like she belongs there. It's helping her accomplish her goals and making her independent.

The two other students in this series, Sierra Gonzales at Princeton University and Julio Martinez at the College of New Rochelle, also said that they felt a sense of belonging.

For Gonzales, she connected with others over their common academic struggles. No one is really ready for Princeton, she said. Even her prep school classmates wondered if they could handle the work.

SIERRA

[00:01:37] I feel like here I am doing homework at least five hours a day. At least. And like -- It's a big change. I'm not OK with it. But I will get used to it I'm sure. [00:01:53][9.1] [15.0]

The College of New Rochelle has a long history serving students like Martinez. He is surrounded by first-gen students, students of color, and people from low-income homes. He feels right at home, he said, which is ironic because he's thinking about transferring.

Martinez has an International Baccalaureate diploma, which is worth 24 credit hours at public universities and colleges back in Texas. He hasn't made up his mind, but he says he sees himself in a win-win position. He's happy where he is, and if he moves back to Texas, it's only because he found a better deal.

It's not that easy for everyone. Inoa's Thoroughbred First project is full of stories about students who struggled much more. He compiles them into quarterly booklets and hosts the story-telling nights so that students can hear from each other. No two stories are exactly alike, he said, but common threads run through them.

[00:04:17] "The college experience. Will have its bumps in the road. There will be some difficulty but that that students typically have it within themselves to persist with that." [00:04:30][13.4]

He discovered that the students are more than their list of challenges. They faced and answered difficult questions about race and class. In many ways, these students are the typical college freshmen who overspend their meal plan or freak out about tests. In other ways, they were so unique -- working when others didn't, questioning things their peers did not, calling on their own experiences for strength.

The most effective college initiatives for first-gen students began by enabling students to tell their own stories. They understand it is critical to help them see themselves as assets to the colleges they attend. The students are seen as more than a status, an income bracket, or a demographic check box.

The colleges that fundamentally succeed with first-gen students are the ones which help them transform their corner of the world, making it more nuanced and complete, all while grappling with the many challenges of being far from home.