

Some Key Take-Aways from SAS OUE's February 25, 2022 panel
First-Generation College Students at Rutgers

On February 25, the SAS Office of Undergraduate Education hosted the third panel in this year's *Voices of Diversity: Rutgers Student Stories* series. The program was initiated last year with support from a RU-NB Diversity, Inclusion, and Community Engagement grant, and is designed to provide students with a platform to share with faculty their perspectives as students with diverse and intersectional identities. The Student Advisory Board -- a team of 17 undergraduate students that represent the breadth and richness of the SAS community, including a range of majors and class years -- develops the panel topics for the year, selects panelists based on the essays of de-identified applicants, and composes the questions for the panels.

Thank you to the Student Advisory Board and the volunteer panelists for the tremendous amount of time, energy, and mental and emotional labor that went into designing, preparing for, and participating in *Voices of Diversity*. We are also grateful to the SAS-OUE team for their work on this initiative, and especially to Jenevieve DeLosSantos for organizing this panel and serving as an advisor to the Student Advisory Board members and Nicole Gangino for her extensive support and assistance throughout the entire process of creating and hosting this event. Finally, thank you to Nancy Capasso-Lee, Senior Program Manager for the SAS Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF), for moderating this panel.

The students shared many varied experiences and perspectives during the panel. Unfortunately, it is not possible to include all of the helpful and insightful contributions by the panelists in a brief document. Below, however, we have summarized a few common themes that emerged from the students' comments.

Please plan to join us for our final panel this year on Friday, April 1st from 10:00 – 11:30 am. The topic for this panel will be "LGBTQ+ Student Stories."

Voices of Diversity: First-Generation College Students at Rutgers

Several common themes emerged during the panel:

Panelists appreciate Rutgers and being part of the Rutgers community.

“Rutgers is a great institution—it’s a huge and diverse school. It’s new every day.”

“Because Rutgers is such a diverse campus with so many different people walking around, it’s hard to feel excluded because you’re almost one with the community while being different at the same time.”

“A lot of people are scared and don’t like that Rutgers is so big—people in my hometown visited and said that’s not for me. But it was the opposite for me—I feel like I was sheltered in a small town, and I wanted to get out and explore and meet new people. And I’ve done just that here. The other day, I was on a bus, miserable and packed like a sardine, and a kid came up to me and complimented my tattoos. I made a friend that day!”

The students shared a strong desire to make their families proud and serve as role models for others.

“I was raised by a single dad who didn’t go to college and had to choose work over school... I never had a parent figure to guide me through college. I’m doing it on my own, but really FOR my dad. I just want to make him proud. All he does is work. A lot of first-generation college students, it’s not that their parents didn’t want to go to college. They’re proud of us; my dad always brags about me. They couldn’t go to college because they had to work and support their families. My goal is to make them proud.”

“Family is everything to me... I come from small beginnings... my father only finished 4th grade and my mother barely finished high school. When I look at their situations, it becomes difficult to know I’ll be alone in this journey and will have to pick up things along the way... My father spent his whole life working. I’m the oldest with two younger brothers and want to show them as an example. I’ve been doubted my whole life, and I want to show them that you can do things even when people doubt you. Teachers have doubted me. It doesn’t matter where you come from. You can still prove your worth at RU or any other institution.”

Panelists also shared a number of difficult challenges they encounter as first-generation college students and noted an important distinction between access and success.

- Challenges related to instructors’ (and others’) assumptions about the background knowledge and experiences students bring with them to college.

“I keep reminding myself: You have to ask, when setting up an appointment/meeting, get a checklist... I didn’t know what to ask in my advising meetings and just expected them to tell me what I needed... That was a big, hard experience for me at RU [learning the importance of knowing what to ask/having a checklist].”

Panelists shared the following examples of assumed knowledge and experience:

- Knowledge about financial aid, including the process of completing and filing FAFSAs
- Knowing how to navigate processes related to seeking advising, designing a course schedule, and making sure to be aware of all degree requirements (like the SAS Core Curriculum).
- Terminology and concepts related to higher education that may be unfamiliar to first-generation students but common knowledge among other students.
 - What prerequisites are and how they work
 - Terms like syllabus and assessment
- Not being familiar with some of the technological tools used in classes
- Knowing about (and being able to afford) all of the required textbooks and course materials
- Difficulties adjusting to logistical issues related to being a student at Rutgers, including/especially the bus system (a struggle that is likely not limited to first-generation students).
- Not realizing that the level of “hand-holding” students become used to from high school is not also true in college, especially at a large place like Rutgers. *“When I came to Rutgers, it was culture shock that I had to put myself out there and ask all these questions. Remember to email professors if you’re struggling on an assignment because otherwise, they won’t know (you don’t see them every day like in high school). And make sure you email them before 5 pm, but don’t email them too early... that was a culture shock to me and something I didn’t know coming into Rutgers.”*

Suggestions for instructors and advisors:

- Do not assume that students come to college with prior knowledge about/familiarity with the terms, concepts, and processes we often take for granted in higher education. Take time to clearly explain what you mean—simplify your language when possible. This will likely help *all* students.
 - Provide links or resources to help students understand what terms like “syllabus” mean.
 - Create an anonymous space (perhaps in Canvas through private assignments, for example) where students can submit or ask questions. *“Students may feel shame/uncomfortable about asking if they’re first generation and assume that others will understand what that [the unfamiliar term/concept] means.”*
 - Understand the challenges that first-generation college students may be facing in adjusting to college *on top of* the considerable challenges that most first-year students experience.
- **First-generation colleges students come from diverse backgrounds and have a wide range of other identities that shape their experiences and perspectives.**

“There are themes that tie us all together, but we’re not monolithic. We have different intersecting identities.”

- As the students shared with the audience, these identities include (among others) students from low-income backgrounds, a non-traditional student returning after a break from college and working while in school, a student adopted internationally as a young child, a child of immigrant parents, a transwoman, and a student who largely grew up in the foster care system.

- It is critical for instructors and others in the Rutgers community to recognize that although there are some common challenges, these (and other first-generation) students all have unique experiences, backgrounds, and identities. *“I think the key take-away is that all your students are different and are all going through different journeys and come from immensely diverse backgrounds, so I think it’s important to make sure inclusivity is a major aspect in the classroom.”*

- **Access to academic and support resources:**

“Providing money and access to colleges is part of the solution, but having proper advising and resources so students can feel included and able to succeed is also a major part... RU does a good job of making students feel like they belong, but it would be good to have even more models and programs that engage students in a one-on-one, individual setting like EOF (Summer Institute plus ongoing advising).”

- Students generally feel like they have access to academic resources and support systems and recognize the value of learning how to independently identify and seek out support, but it can sometimes be difficult to find resources in such a large and complicated place, especially early on during their time at Rutgers.
- Peer mentors, alongside faculty and advisors, can be very helpful as friends and valuable sources of information.

Suggestions for instructors and advisors:

- It is very helpful when people/programs reach out directly to students, at least initially. *“It’s students’ responsibility to reach out, but instructors giving a nudge can help more students feel comfortable.”*
- Put students in touch with specific resources when you see that a student is dealing with a particular situation (e.g., VPVA, Office of Disability Services, CAPS)
- Find ways to try to bring academic and student well-being related resources together. For example, be sure to include RUSA-recommended student resources on syllabi and refer to them throughout the semester, not just at the beginning. Invite representatives from support offices on campus to visit your course and tell students about the services/resources they offer.

- **Concerns about post-college employment and career opportunities:**

“I came in low-income and first-generation, and my peers were already connected, their parents knew how to make resumes, they were on Linked In. They could leave Rutgers and get a good job, right off... I thought where am I in this race? A degree doesn’t necessarily mean I’ll get a job. Bring in researchers and professionals to bridge the gap between what’s being learned in the classroom and what’s practical.”

- Panelists expressed that they often feel behind their classmates in knowing about/seeking out important career-related opportunities like internships.

- This feeling compounds concerns about graduation not necessarily translating into a good job/career, which are especially significant for students who come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds than many of their peers.

Suggestions for instructors and advisors:

- Make direct connections between classroom learning and “real-world” skills.
- Be attentive and sensitive to dynamics between students and intervene when students boast about their experiences/opportunities. *“As a first-generation student, especially as a freshman in my calculus class, everyone’s like ‘I just applied to Microsoft,’ and I’m like ‘I didn’t even know we could do that!’ Especially in smaller classes, if you see a student is being overrun or having a hard time making their voice heard, call them in and make sure they feel heard.”*

- **Students take great pride in their accomplishments, but also often experience imposter syndrome**

“I’m immensely proud of the journey I’ve taken and am very open about that. But it can also be ‘faking it till you make it.’... A lot of it for me is reminding myself that I deserve to be here so I can finish my degree and make it a more even space for my future classmates... it’s hard not to compare yourself to classmates with very different backgrounds/exposure to higher education experience coming in.”

“Very early on, I was given the message, you’re not really capable of the same things as your classmates with more access to resources. I tell myself that I’m capable, but it’s hard. I sometimes feel performative in my career goals and education. It’s hard to keep going when the semester gets rough, like when you have a bad grade on a midterm. You have to think about why you really want to be here; if you’re just going through motions, it creates a dynamic of ‘I’m here to prove something’ as opposed to why I really want to be here.”

Suggestions for instructors and advisors:

- Acknowledge when you think a student is going above and beyond and really putting in a lot of effort, either publicly or privately with the student.
- Remind students that they are welcome and valuable in the classroom (or other) space.
- Help strengthen students’ confidence and belief that they do belong and deserve to be in college.
- The idea of high stakes testing can be very jarring and lead to disengagement if students perform poorly on an early assessment. More frequent, lower-stakes quizzes and assignments, more group work, and creative assignments that get students excited can foster investment and buy-in from students, which can also build students’ confidence.

- **Personal connections are critically important for students' success and feelings of inclusion**

“When it’s a struggle to get to class, it matters to know that you’ll be missed, that people will notice if you’re not there. It’s a great way to make people feel connected.”

- Students feel better supported and more included when they have personal connections with instructors, advisors/mentors, and peers.
- Students who stay on campus during breaks and weekends often feel isolated and lonely during those times.

Suggestions for instructors and advisors:

- As an instructor, create opportunities for connection with your students, even if it’s just through office hours.
- Use classroom space intentionally to foster connections, when possible. Sitting in a circle in smaller courses, for example, is helpful in enabling one-on-one relationships.
- Work to facilitate/create opportunities for in-person connection during breaks and weekends.