A Seat at the Table: How First-Gen Students Thrive When Institutions Make Room

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My college application essay told a story about my messy, loud, and multicultural holiday tables. In it, I described growing up among fiery Hispanic women and dramatic Italian men, with dinner guests who spoke Russian, Spanish, or both, and arguments that roared through the house like a second fireplace. At those tables, I wrote, I became a kind of diplomat: someone who could navigate disagreement without shutting it down, bridge community out of conflict, and find common ground in ideological chaos. I thought this skill had prepared me for anything. When I arrived at Southern Methodist University, I expected to continue building connections across differences, believing my upbringing would translate effortlessly into my college experience. However, I soon realized that while I had learned to navigate cultural divides, I had never learned how to navigate socioeconomic class. The families that filled our holiday table came from many backgrounds, but we all shared a common denominator: we were relatively poor. At SMU, that common denominator vanished. I found myself in an unfamiliar world of privilege, and for the first time, my background set me apart in ways I didn't know how to interpret. Over the last four years, the tension between belonging and alienation driven by my unconventional background tested and ultimately deepened my values. I now understand better than ever the importance of community, belonging, and institutional support in turning my survival into growth.

Class Divide on Campus

In my introductory Corporate Communication and Public Affairs class, the professor asked how many of us knew someone who had been impacted by the 2008 financial crisis. Not someone who had personally experienced it—just someone we knew. Only three people raised their

hands. I was one of them. For me, the crisis had defined my childhood: the foreclosure notices, the lost jobs of friends and family, and financial anxiety. At the peak of the recession, 5.6 million people were unemployed (Laird). Nearly double that number, an estimated 10 million people, lost their homes during the Financial Crisis (Lopez). Nationally, I was not alone in growing up with the effects of 2008. Yet, at SMU, I found myself in the minority. In that classroom filled with dozens of students, only three of us had seen the financial crisis ripple through our families or neighborhoods or at least felt comfortable enough to admit that. It was a small moment, but it drew a sharp border between me and the rest of the room.

I began noticing that border everywhere. It showed up when classmates casually mentioned a three-day weekend in Europe, when professors assigned expensive textbooks without a second thought, and when organizations held "inclusive" events that assumed everyone could afford a $50 buy-in. These weren't acts of malice, but rather reflections of an environment designed by and for a different kind of student. Sociologist Anthony Abraham Jack explores this dynamic in *The Privileged Poor*, where he argues that gaining access to elite institutions does not mean gaining access to all parts of the institution. For many low-income students, the "hidden curriculum" of higher education—knowing how to navigate office hours, secure internships, speak up in class, or even ask for an extension—remains opaque (Jack 5). While trying to pass my classes, I was also trying to translate an unfamiliar culture.

This divide often feels invisible, but it is reflected rather visibly in SMU's student demographic data. According to a 2017 *New York Times* study on economic diversity and student outcomes, SMU ranks among the least socioeconomically diverse universities in the nation, with more students from the top 1% of the income distribution than from the entire bottom 60% (Aisch et al.). I was part of a statistical minority at SMU, a minority that did not exist off campus. This

realization did not come with anger, it came with confusion. My upbringing taught me to value hard work, resilience, and community. As a first-generation college student, I was told that academia was the key to professional success. But on campus, success often seemed to hinge on access—access to networks, to unspoken norms, to free time and disposable income. As a freshman, I naively believed that I could outwork these gaps. It is clear now that invisible capital—cultural, social, and financial—shaped who got to belong.

Scholars like Tara J. Yosso, an expert on Critical Race Theory, have long argued that universities reward dominant and physical forms of capital, often overlooking the strengths that first-generation and low-income students bring with them. In Yosso's words, students from marginalized backgrounds possess rich "community cultural wealth"—a collection of assets including familial support, navigational skill, and resistant capital that helps them succeed despite systemic barriers (Yosso 70). But that wealth is rarely recognized in traditional academic settings. At SMU, I had to learn how to speak a new affluent language while still holding onto the parts of myself that didn't fit.

The Myth of Meritocracy

At first, I did not have the language to describe what I was feeling. I told myself I was just tired, busy, or focused. I worked multiple jobs—sometimes 3 or 4 in a semester—and lived off campus. As a result, I did not go out on weekends and often skipped club events that required dues. I told my friends I had to study, but the truth was that I did not want to explain why I could not afford, because of constraints on time or money, to join in. I slipped away quietly, not out of resentment, but out of exhaustion. The things that made me different were not dramatic as I often "looked" the part and appeared to fit in comfortably among my peers. But these quiet, constant,

and cumulative moments of exclusion that seemed insignificant to others slowly gathered into something heavier.

At some point, pride gave way to shame. I had arrived at SMU proud to be a first-generation student, proud of having "beat the odds." But the more time I spent on campus, the more it felt like my background was a liability—something to minimize, hide, or joke about before someone else could. I stopped raising my hand in class when the conversation turned personal. I stopped mentioning where I worked or why I couldn't attend things. I stopped talking. Because when I did, I had to watch the flash of confusion—or worse, pity—cross someone's face.

This type of isolation is not just emotional. It has real academic consequences for students. Research shows that first-generation college students are far more likely to drop out or transfer than their continuing-generation peers, not because they lack ability but because they lack the support structures that make persistence possible. According to a report by the National Center for Education Statistics, only 27% of first-generation students complete a bachelor's degree within four years, compared to 42% of students with college-educated parents (NCES 2021). Much of that disparity is rooted in what social psychologists call a cultural mismatch theory, or the idea that American universities are built around values of independence and self-promotion, while many first-gen students come from interdependent backgrounds where humility and family obligation are central (Stephens, Fryberg, and Markus 1181). The result is that first-gen students often feel like they are "doing college wrong," even when they are succeeding by every measurable standard.

I was living that mismatch. The values I had grown up with did not translate easily into a place where self-branding and constant networking were rewarded. I did not know how to ask for help

because I had been raised to figure things out alone. I did not know how to "sell myself" in interviews or elevator pitches because no one had ever taught me that was necessary. Even my work ethic, something I had always taken pride in, began to feel like a burden. I was not sleeping enough. I was anxious all the time. Yet, I felt guilty whenever I slowed down. It felt like I had something to prove. I still believed in meritocracy—the idea that my hard work would be enough. I just thought I had to earn my place twice over.

But meritocracy, I was learning, is a myth when the starting lines are this uneven. Success is not only about effort but also about opportunity, recognition, and community. Without those, even the most determined students can lose their footing. I had the grades. I had the work ethic. What I lacked in most spaces was someone to tell me that I belonged.

The Role of Community in Success

During Stampede, SMU's orientation week, I was surrounded by students I assumed would never understand me. As fate would have it, my Stampede guide was the President of SMU's First-Generation Association ("FGA"), and she, too, was a first-generation college student. At that moment, something shifted. I had been on campus for less than a week, but it felt so relieving to hear someone say, "I've been where you are." Her presence alone permitted me to believe that someone "different" could not only survive at SMU but thrive.

At my first FGA meeting several months later, I instantly felt like I had found the community on campus I desperately wanted. In that room, I never had to explain myself. I did not have to minimize my story or translate my experience. Everyone there understood what it meant to navigate financial aid without parental guidance, to juggle jobs and coursework, to feel simultaneously proud and out of place. We did not always share the same cultural background or

career aspirations, but we shared something more fundamental: a lived experience that had, until then, felt invisible on campus.

This was not just a “safe space” for me; it was a launchpad. According to a 2023 report by NASPA: Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, first-generation students who participate in peer support organizations are significantly more likely to report feelings of belonging and academic self-efficacy. These students are not only retained at higher rates but also graduate with greater confidence in their leadership skills and career readiness (NASPA, 2023). My own experience mirrored these findings. FGA made me feel simultaneously welcome and capable. With that foundation in place, everything else began to shift. I started speaking more confidently in class. I joined other student organizations, even those where I was not sure I would find community. I started asking for help from professors, mentors, and peers. I stopped feeling like I had to do everything on my own.

This transformation was not just internal. It was structural. Yosso’s *Community Cultural Wealth* model explains how students from marginalized backgrounds bring with them a unique set of strengths, which she calls “navigational capital,” “familial capital,” and “resistant capital,” among others (Yosso 77). What I gained from FGA was not a new identity. It was the affirmation that I had always carried something valuable with me. The skills I used to help my family survive were not only useful but essential in academic spaces. The difference was that, finally, someone had named them. That naming matters. If first-generation college students are treated like anomalies or success stories instead of active contributors to campus life, we will continue to view college through a deficit lens—focusing on what these students lack instead of what they bring. FGA challenged that narrative for me by creating a space for us to be whole.

Looking back, I understand now that I was not just missing community, but I was missing the context for why I highly valued community. I needed someone to tell me that my struggle was not a personal failure but a systemic pattern. More importantly, I needed to know that there was a way forward, learning from stories passed down through my FGA community of successful alumni that served as inspiration for me to move forward.

With the First Gen Association as my anchor, I felt safe to socially test the waters elsewhere. For the first time, I started joining clubs and attending events that had once felt off-limits. I applied for internships, introduced myself to professors after class, and pursued on-campus leadership roles. With a growing sense of confidence that came from knowing I was not alone, that I could go back to my community if I failed, I no longer saw the campus as something I had to tiptoe through.

There's a common misconception that community is a retreat and that once marginalized students find "their people," they retreat from the rest of campus. My experience was the opposite. FGA gave me the psychological safety and physical resources I needed to venture out, to fail publicly, and to try again. As I expanded my network, I encountered people whose lives looked nothing like mine. Some of my closest friends today grew up flying private and vacationing in the Hamptons. I love them deeply. But I am always aware that our lives are separated by a canyon of experience. Before FGA, those gaps made me feel small. Now, they make me curious. I have learned to let my story exist in rooms where no one shares it.

I have comfortably fit into life at SMU, wearing Lululemon sets to class and bringing my books in a Longchamp tote. Those things do not erase where I come from, but they do sit alongside it

as I choose when and how to adapt. I no longer see "fitting in" as the goal, but as a choice—a set of skills I've earned, not borrowed.

This personal transformation reflects a broader truth about diversity in higher education: exposure alone is not enough. Bringing students from different backgrounds together does not automatically create mutual understanding. That requires infrastructure—safe spaces, affinity groups, mentors, and intentional programming that prepares students not just to coexist but to collaborate. As educators and policymakers debate the value of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion ("DEI") initiatives, they often overlook this nuance. The point of DEI is not to keep students in silos, but to give them the grounding they need to take risks across differences.

A growing body of research supports this idea. A 2020 study published in the *Journal of College Student Development* found that first-generation students who participated in culturally relevant support programs were significantly more likely to build cross-cultural friendships and engage in leadership roles across campus (Hurtado & Ruiz 421). I see that in my own story. Finding my first-gen community did not limit me, instead, it gave me the courage to explore spaces that felt unsafe.

The Case for DEI

If there is one thing my experience at SMU has made clear, it is this: without institutional support, I might have survived college, but I would not have thrived. SMU's FGA and First-Generation Initiative gave me more than a space to belong, but a reason to stay and take up space on an affluent campus. Programs like FGA are part of a broader category of DEI initiatives—structures that exist to level the playing field for students who enter higher education without the social, financial, or cultural capital that many of their peers take for granted.

Despite growing political opposition to DEI policies, the qualitative and quantitative data is clear: DEI works. According to a 2022 study published in the *Journal of Equity in Higher Education*, institutions that invest in DEI programming see measurable improvements in student outcomes—including higher retention rates, increased grade point averages, and stronger post-graduate success for students from historically excluded backgrounds (Taylor & Francis 2022). These gains are not accidental. They are the result of intentional programming that affirms students' identities, validates their lived experiences, and equips them with tools to navigate spaces that were not originally built for them. We know, based on decades of research, that students from low-income or first-gen backgrounds face greater barriers to persistence and belonging, and it is ethically and financially important that universities do not ignore those barriers. Instead, universities should invest in initiatives that dismantle these barriers, and programs like FGA do just that by offering mentorship, peer support, and visibility. The impact of DEI programs extends beyond the students they directly serve. A campus that actively supports marginalized students is a campus that benefits everyone. Inclusive classrooms foster richer discussions. Diverse leadership produces more responsive policies. A sense of belonging is contagious, and it makes space for all students to show up more fully, not just those who have traditionally held power.

Moreover, DEI initiatives play a key role in preparing students for the real world. In a 2021 survey by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), over 90% of employers said that a demonstrated ability to work with people from diverse backgrounds was "very important" in job candidates (AAC&U 2021). Colleges that fail to equip their students with these competencies are not just neglecting their mission but are also failing the future workforce.

My journey at SMU reflects these realities. I arrived on campus ready to study, unaware of how much more I would need to succeed. What changed my trajectory was not individual grit but institutional support. Without programs like FGA, my story would be very different. I might have retreated further into silence. I might have left altogether. Instead, I stayed, and I thrived. I earned leadership positions in on-campus groups, participated in prestigious internships, and was granted distinguished scholarships. That is the power of DEI: It is not a buzzword or a checkbox but a lifeline.

The DEI Backlash and Why It Matters

A very different conversation surrounding DEI is unfolding across the country. In recent years, diversity, equity, and inclusion programs in higher education have come under attack. States like Texas and Florida have introduced or passed legislation banning DEI offices at public universities, defunding positions related to diversity advocacy, and removing requirements for diversity statements in hiring practices. Supporters of these policies claim that DEI initiatives are divisive, discriminatory, or ideologically misgiven. But for students like me, these programs are not political but personal. They are the scaffolding that made my success possible.

The backlash against DEI is deeply alarming, not just because of what it takes away but because of what it reveals. At its core, this movement is built on a false assumption: that students begin college on equal footing and that acknowledging difference is inherently unfair.
However, equality without equity is not just. When we strip away the resources designed to support underrepresented students, we are not creating neutral ground—we are reinforcing existing hierarchies. According to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, the consequences of these DEI rollbacks are already being felt. Institutions in states with anti-DEI legislation are seeing

increased faculty turnover, reduced student support services, and declining application rates among students from historically excluded backgrounds (Quintana and Zamudio-Suarez). The message is clear: If you don't belong to the dominant culture, you are not a priority. That message does not just hurt students, but rather it diminishes the integrity and mission of higher education itself. What is more, these rollbacks ignore the overwhelming body of evidence demonstrating DEI's effectiveness. As discussed previously, programs like FGA do not merely help students feel good about themselves. They improve measurable outcomes through improved retention and graduation rates, leadership development, and career readiness. When opponents of DEI advocate for "colorblind" or "merit-based" policies, they erase the very real barriers that first-gen, low-income, and racially marginalized students face.

I know this because I lived it. Without FGA, I would have lacked support and visibility. I would have moved through SMU quietly, constantly second-guessing whether I belonged. DEI did not hand me opportunities, but it handed me the language to recognize that I deserved them. And that distinction matters. Some of the most meaningful moments of my college experience—speaking on student panels, representing SMU and first-generation students at a national communications conference, receiving scholarships I never thought I could earn—happened because of these "DEI initiatives". Those opportunities did not just enrich my education; they changed the way I saw myself. They reminded me that students like me have something to offer—not despite our backgrounds but because of them. To dismantle DEI is to dismantle those opportunities. It is to tell students who are already marginalized that they must succeed in silence, without recognition or community. However, for college students looking to succeed, inclusion is not optional, and belonging is not a luxury. As such, diversity is not a threat to but a foundation for excellence.

Conclusion

When I think back to the values that shaped me, I return to our chaotic holiday dinners and the quiet satisfaction of building bridges where others saw divides. I believed that upbringing had prepared me for anything. However, college challenged that belief in ways I could not anticipate. It was not just cultural divides I had to navigate, but economic divides. With that comes the weight of invisibility and the realization that even the strongest work ethic can buckle without support. At SMU, I did not lose my values, but I did re-learned them in a new context. I discovered that community is not something that happens by accident, but rather something that must be cultivated, protected, and sometimes fought for. I learned that resilience is not enough if it comes at the cost of isolation.

I also learned what is possible for students when institutions do the hard work of equity. Through SMU's First-Generation Association, I found a space that saw me fully. That foundation gave me the courage to expand into new spaces, to speak openly, and to lead. My transformation was not the result of grit alone. It was the product of both personal effort and institutional investment. That is why I believe so deeply in the necessity of DEI programs in higher education. Not as political tools, but as moral imperatives. These programs are not about division but about access. DEI does not weaken academic standards but raises the bar for inclusion. Lastly, DEI does not benefit just a few but strengthens the entire campus community.

In a time when DEI is under attack, my story is not just personal but also political. It is a reminder that behind every acronym, there are students whose lives are being shaped, sometimes silently, by the presence or absence of support. I hope colleges continue to invest in those students. Not just to diversify their brochures but to transform their institutions from the inside

out. When we come together around the table—when we value community, inclusion, and equity—we create something stronger than any one perspective alone. We create the conditions for growth, empathy, and belonging, and that is where real success in education begins.

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