

SMITH

ALUMNAE
QUARTERLY

Stories of
being first
in family
to finish
college

1st
gent

Jewels Rhoads '11

1st gen

By
Andrea
Cooper '83

CHANGING THE SCRIPT
Coming to Smith as first in the family to finish college can mean culture shock and confusion. But, as one alumna says, it can open doors to 'a life I never knew existed.'

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**DREAMS OF
COLLEGE**

Helen Lan Fong
Lee AC '03
Portland,
Oregon
SOCIOLOGY
MAJOR

CAREER:

Training and development specialist.
"What I love is that not only do I help directly train our future and current leaders, but I also get to build community and inspire staff members to bring to life our values and mission."

**WORKING
TO GET AN
EDUCATION:**

"I would imagine myself in the classroom and dream about college as I was on my knees scrubbing floors."

ESCAPE ROUTE:

"Perhaps my upbringing in a very tough city developed my internal belief that I could escape, survive and still have dreams beyond my current situation."

*Photographed
by Robbie
McClaran,
April 29, 2016,
in Portland,
Oregon*



VICTOR GOMEZ couldn't help teasing his daughter Kiara as they toted boxes in the August heat outside Talbot House. Earlier that day, in their modest neighborhood in Queens, New York, they had piled her belongings into his battered van. The drive to Smith was only a few hours but felt much longer. "This is in the middle of nowhere," he joked in Spanish as he looked around at a neighborhood that was so different from home. "Where did you find this place?" Kiara Gomez '14 laughed but was thinking the same thing. Smith looked like a painting from a fairy tale. Her parents had encouraged her ambitions, but they couldn't help her paint herself into the picture.

Gomez' first few weeks on campus were a blur of "confusion, depression, homesickness, feeling dumb and unprepared," she says. Her classes seemed far beyond what her high school had prepared her for, plus she had to work night shifts so she could send money home. She managed classes, she admits, "by going without sleep for multiple days at a time and then crashing." Gomez got through it by staying focused on her goal: a flourishing career that would allow her to help support her extended family. Today, two years after graduating, she is well on her way. She recently completed a Fulbright research grant in Greece, and this fall she will head to the University of Texas at Austin to pursue a doctorate in geosciences and to research climate change.

Despite the unique challenges students like Gomez may face, Smith College has made it a priority to reach out to students who are the first in their families to seek a four-year bachelor's degree. About 17 percent of Smith undergraduates are first-generation college students, a percentage that's been consistent over the past decade. "These students bring an important kind of diversity to the community, both in and outside the classroom," says Dean of Admission Debra Shaver, herself a first-gen college student.

The college benefits from their presence, and for first-gen students a Smith education can open doors of opportunity that they never knew existed. Helen Lan Fong Lee AC '03—born in Liverpool, England, to parents from Hong Kong—recalls a childhood scarred by racism,

from name-calling to outright threats. As a young woman, she worked a variety of jobs, including cleaning houses. But she always knew she would get an education. "It was such a profoundly deep experience for me," she says of coming to Smith at age 34. "I loved the classroom. My heart opened up. My head was on fire."

Being at Smith was the first time Lee felt at home in a community. Today, she works as a training and development specialist in Portland, Oregon. "My major was sociology. That helped me understand class, race, privilege and values that shape

people's lives and how they interact. It was like coming alive," Lee says. "I was able to reframe my life and what my parents had gone through."

In recent years, first-gen students have had a higher profile on campus in part because President Kathleen McCartney, herself a first-gen college graduate, has championed the issue. But Smith leaders have long viewed identifying strong first-gen prospects as a moral imperative. "First-generation students are woefully underrepresented in higher education, especially at the highly selective colleges," Shaver says.

The reasons are complex. Some first-gen students come from families or communities

"It was a profoundly deep experience for me. I loved the classroom. My heart opened up."

where a four-year degree isn't expected. That sentiment can extend to high school guidance counselors, who may steer students toward work, community college or the college in their town. High schools in low-income communities don't necessarily have the resources to prepare students adequately for college. And a price tag of more than \$60,000 a year for tuition, room and board can seem insurmountable for students—and their families—who may not know how to navigate the complex terrain of financial aid, or understand that it might substantially cover the costs.

Of course, first gen does not equal low income. "First-generation students tend to be painted

MOTIVATED TO SUCCEED

Jewels Rhode '11
Durham, North Carolina
PSYCHOLOGY MAJOR

CAREER:
Project manager at a cancer center

PLAYING CATCH-UP:
"At a place like Smith, where everyone is in the top 10 percent, it highlighted the quality of my education compared to others. I never felt like I couldn't get to where they were. I just had to work extra hard."

AMBITION RULES:
"Most of my success comes from me naturally being self-motivated and proactive at leveraging resources."

Photographed by Christopher T. Martin, April 26, 2016, in Chapel Hill, North Carolina





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**A PATH OF HER
OWN MAKING**

Kiara Gomez '14
on a Fulbright
in Athens,
Greece
GEOSCIENCES
MAJOR

CAREER:
Entering
a Ph.D.
program at the
University of
Texas, Austin

HER OWN WAY:
“When I was
applying,
my college
counselor
advised me not
to apply to any
out-of-state
school because
I did not ‘fit’ in
their programs.
It was after a
few days that
I realized she
meant diversity-
wise.”

**ALL OF THE
ABOVE:**
“I took
advantage
of every
opportunity
that Smith gave
its students:
grants, travel,
work, Praxis,
seminars,
fellowships,
using the
career center,
contacting
faculty.”

*Photographed by
Beth Perkins,
April 2, 2013,
in Astoria,
Queens, New
York City*

as a monolithic group,” says Tina Wildhagen, assistant professor of sociology at Smith, who is writing a book about first-gen issues. “‘First gen’ becomes a code word for low-income students of color.” But parents of first-gen students may be successful entrepreneurs who never applied to college or who dropped out to pursue careers. Tradespeople who didn’t graduate from four-year colleges can earn higher incomes than college graduates working in the nonprofit sector.

No matter their family origins, first-gen women at Smith perform academically on a par with their classmates. They return for their sophomore year at the same rate as non-first-gen students, and for years their graduation rates have been at or above Smith’s overall four-year graduation rate of roughly 82 percent, Shaver says. That compares very favorably to the national average. According to a 2011 study from UCLA,

only 27 percent of first-generation students nationwide graduated from college within four years, compared to 42 percent of students whose parents attended college.

Several first-generation alumnae clearly say that while the college has widened their horizons, it’s up to them to capitalize on it and to pass that experience along. Stephanie Gale AC ’13 earned a GED as a teenager and hadn’t envisioned herself at Smith until an employer encouraged her to apply. “Smith is kind of intimidating,” she says. Now she credits the college with teaching her “how to talk professionally with others and develop my leadership skills.” Her years at Smith affected her children, too. “Being in that environment, living on campus, helped my kids understand the importance of education,” she says. Her daughter wants to study engineering at Smith.

Resources for first-generation students



“First generation” is a relatively new distinction on college campuses. Programs designed specifically for this group can be traced to the early 2000s, says Tina Wildhagen, an assistant professor of sociology with a book in the works on first-generation college students. Since 2013, Wildhagen has conducted interviews and done field observations at several colleges and universities to get a sense of how first-gen students’ identities differ in different settings. “The extent to which students identify as first generation and take it on as a label they are comfortable with is really variable across schools,” she says. “When there’s a good organizational structure for first-generation students, like we have at Smith ... that really helps students to claim the identity and to be proud

of it, rather than to be ashamed of it.”

At Smith, the support begins the moment they step on campus.

WHEN THEY ARRIVE: President Kathleen McCartney sets the tone by welcoming first-gen students with a group meeting at the president’s house. In a first-gen orientation program, they can learn about campus resources and begin to build a sense of community. “I focus a lot more on connections between them than I do on the heady stuff,” says assistant dean Marjorie Litchford, who organizes the program and is herself first gen. “Smithies are so heady already that, as much as they think they want to know about resources, they also really want to connect with other first gens and make friends and feel OK about being first gen.”

WHILE THEY ARE STUDENTS:

The student-run F1GS (First Generation Student Alliance) connects students via Facebook, meetings and events like the Five College First Generation Mixer. In April, the group sponsored a first-gen visibility week with first-gen faculty panels, a film screening and a day for students, faculty and staff to wear first-gen T-shirts. “We want to let first-gen students know they’re not alone,” said F1GS president Helen Mayer ’17.

Because the financial aid process can be particularly daunting for first-gen students, who may have to complete the high-stakes applications without parental help, F1GS hosts information sessions with Smith’s financial aid director. And in the spring, juniors and seniors toast their academic successes at a

first-gen dinner.

The faculty is gaining greater awareness via trainings for first-year advisers so they know about resources for, say, a student who might not have winter clothes or enough money to fix her glasses. Administrators say they are proud of what they offer, even as they look for unmet needs. Studying abroad, for example, can sometimes be difficult for first-gen students. Students also have to feel comfortable enough to ask for help and research what’s possible.

For McCartney, reaching first-gen students is an inherent part of Smith’s mission. “I’m acutely aware of the privilege higher education bestows,” she says. “I think that makes me want to do everything I can to make Smith the most equitable, inclusive campus possible.”—AC ’83

"Our challenge, as 'first-gen' or 'tenth-gen' individuals, is to determine how to make the most of the opportunities we are given to improve our lives and the lives of others," says Eileen Sullivan '73, a self-described townie whose father worked in construction, including on several projects at Smith. She went on to earn an M.B.A. and was able to retire at 55 from a 30-year career in human resources. Within her career she caught glimpses of what her life might have been like if her immigrant parents hadn't impressed on her the opportunities they saw for those with college degrees. Sullivan recalls, early in her career, working at a plant that manufactured medical devices in a poor town in New York state. The local high school guidance counselor asked her to speak to students about college and help persuade them not to drop out. "One young woman wanted to quit school at 16, babysit for two years, then begin working at the plant in an unskilled job," Sullivan says. If Sullivan had grown up in this environment and never attended college, she believes she might have had a similarly narrow world view, in which a career at the local plant seemed the only option.

Allison Bellew Sousa '08 recognized early on that college was an escape route, a way to change the hand she'd been dealt. Sousa grew up with her sister in three foster-care families in Los Angeles. Her parents separated when she was little; her mother left permanently when Sousa was 10. Sousa and her sister moved in with their father, but he sold everything the family owned for drug money. "Getting to college was important for me because I truly did not want

cially for first-gen students—can be a time of great discovery about one's identity and capabilities. Harlem-born Jewels Rhode '11, a project manager at the Lineberger Comprehensive Cancer Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, recalls gravitating toward people who had backgrounds similar to hers. Joining the Black Students Alliance and participating in the Bridge pre-orientation program for students of color gave her important social support and grounding. Rhode had been in the top 10 percent of her high school class, but at a school she describes as underresourced.

"At a place like Smith, where everyone is in the top 10 percent, it highlighted the quality of my education compared to others," she says. "I never felt like I couldn't get to where they were. I just had to work extra hard. I'm truly thankful for Smith for providing me with amazing resources to advance my career and opening my eyes to a life I didn't realize existed. However, I can't give all the credit to Smith. Most of my success comes from me naturally being self-motivated and proactive at identifying and leveraging resources."

At Smith, admission officers look for the same qualities in first-gen applicants as in other students, but some, like Jewels Rhode, stand out for their motivation and determination to succeed. "Often we find an especially deep reserve of resilience and ambition among first-gen students, who may have had to figure out things on their own more than students whose families can guide and advise them through the college process," says admission officer Sidonia Dalby. It's

easy to understand why the college would court them, Shaver adds. "The first-gen students at Smith are really smart."

Still, first-gen students face distinct challenges. Without the years of hearing parents'

stories about college, first-gen students, especially those from lower-income families, may experience a deep sense of culture shock at elite colleges. Sarah Coburn '07, a legal aid attorney in Philadelphia, was raised by a single mom whose own mother had a third-grade education. At Smith, Coburn was suddenly surrounded, she says, "by people who were walking in the door with the kinds of cultural capital I was previously unaware of—boarding school educations, professional connections and the like. I attended dinners, paid for by friends' parents, where the bill exceeded my tuition bill." She eventually adjusted and developed a strong connection with her adviser, who was also first gen.

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**PREVAILING OVER A
ROUGH START**

*Allison Bellew
Sousa '08
Boulder,
Colorado
COMPUTER
SCIENCE MAJOR*

CAREER:
As a project manager for an IT company, she has the freedom to set her own hours.

UPHILL CLIMB:
After her family crumbled, she grew up with her sister in three different foster families. "I truly did not want to end up anything like my parents."

**IMPROVING
HER ODDS:**
"I didn't know any high school graduates who had good job prospects, so I focused on getting an advantage with a good college degree."

*Photographed by
Julia Hoggson
Vandenoever
'96, May 2, 2016,
in Boulder,
Colorado*

"Often we find an especially deep reserve of resilience and ambition among first-gen students."

to end up anything like my parents, or most of my family," Sousa says. "I didn't know any high school graduates who had good job prospects, so I focused on getting an advantage with a good college degree."

Her high school guidance counselor helped her identify scholarship opportunities, and Sousa won a Fulfillment Fund scholarship to attend Smith. Her degree in computer science was the foundation for her career in software development and management. Now she's a project manager for an IT consulting company in Boulder, Colorado, and has the freedom to set her own hours and work anywhere she likes.

A Smith education—for everyone, but espe-





DOORS OPENED

Sarah Coburn
'07
Philadelphia
ENGLISH MAJOR

CAREER:

"I am engaged in incredibly meaningful work: I was a public defender and now represent parents in child welfare proceedings."

WINGING IT:

"I was largely unprepared for the college application process. I didn't take any kind of SAT prep course and sat for the exam without a calculator."

TAKING A CHANCE:

"I only knew that Smith was a beautiful women's college not too far from home and would offer me opportunities my mother and grandmother had never had."

Photographed by Zave Smith.
April 29, 2016,
in Philadelphia

The first-gen experience did not end when Coburn passed through the Grécourt Gates and into the rest of her life. She chose law school because she had a limited idea of what other options were possible. "I am engaged in incredibly meaningful work—I was a public defender and now represent parents in child welfare proceedings—but I sometimes find myself wondering what my professional life would look like if I'd had a bit more perspective before pursuing law school, or had grown up with a better sense of just how big the world is, and just how many opportunities were available to me with a Smith degree in hand."

For some current first-gen students, issues of class, race and being first gen merge to amplify that sense of being an outsider. "If you're a student of color, there are perceptions that come with that, at Smith or any private liberal arts institution which is predominantly white," says Audrey Olmos-Govea '17, a member of Smith's First Generation Student Alliance (see page

"At Smith, I was part of a diverse community. It was at home that I was different."

35). "It's easier to believe the student of color is a first-gen student. ...You grapple with those assumptions in ways that white students don't."

Adriana Chalas '12, of Union City, New Jersey, grew up in a predominantly Latino community where many people lived at or below the poverty line. Following her acceptance to Smith, she was invited to a Women of Distinction weekend geared to admitted students of color to give them a sense of life at Smith in the hope they will enroll. "Just being there felt right," she says. Still, once she was a student, she found that walking into buildings more beautiful than any she had seen before, enjoying access to a computer lab where the technology was always available and even stopping work for tea on Fridays were all a shock. "Being able to find your voice and get all that confidence that Smith talks about imbuing in their students is hard when you feel the institution itself is at such a higher level," she says.

Chalas felt sure she would leave Smith after her first year. But during winter break at home, she realized she missed the stimulating conversations. "Even though that new experience was so foreign, coming back home was equally foreign in different ways," she says. "I knew when I was home that Smith was a good thing." She fared better during second semester, meeting a

favorite professor with whom she still keeps in touch. Her first job after college was as an admission counselor at Smith.

The mere decision to go to college can strain relationships back home, even when parents are supportive. Terry Dymkowski Kupp '89 lived with several generations of family as a toddler, including some who spoke Polish. Always a strong student, she was driven to attend a selective college. Her parents, who met in a factory, welcomed her dreams, even if they didn't fully understand them. Kupp handled the college search process herself, from the applications and financial aid forms to the college visits and obtaining money orders to pay the application fees. (Her family didn't have a checking account.)

She remains the only family member with a four-year college degree. "At Smith, I was part of a diverse community. It was at home that I was different. I had different aspirations. I liked doing different things. I talked about different things than they did. Of course that instilled

some fear in them, about where I would go, what I would become." Today Kupp applies insights from her own life in her job as director of the Center for Academic Success at Cayuga Community College in Auburn, New

York, where she works with first-gen students.

Smith isn't the answer for all first-gen students who enroll. Jewels Rhode has a few first-gen friends who decided to transfer because they didn't feel the college served their needs. But when the college fit is good, being at Smith can help first-gen students chart a new, perhaps unexpected course.

"An alumna once told me, 'Once a Smithie, always a Smithie.' I didn't realize what this meant until I graduated and realized that Smith will always be with you," Kiara Gomez says. "Powerful actions such as voicing my opinion, questioning why, breaking barriers and stereotypes, and speaking out for what is right would have never been possible had it not been for my Smith education." Her father eventually came to like and appreciate Smith—especially after hearing from others about its rigor and prestige.

Gomez has returned to her high school to encourage students to apply to Smith. The message she brings is one worth carrying to every potential first-generation college student: Yes, you are college-worthy, and yes, it will be hard, but it will transform you.

Freelance writer Andrea Cooper '83 is a frequent contributor to the SAQ.