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## Farewell to the Past and Hello to the Unknown

### Abstract

Viviana Diaz is a first-gen undergraduate student at Cal State LA. Growing up as an only child, Diaz took inspiration from her aunt who is ready to face war and her mother who brings light to any place she goes. Diaz graduated high school in 2015 and then earned her associate's degree at Long Beach Community College in 2022. Now working on her bachelor's at Cal State LA, Diaz remains motivated by a strong sense of determination and a firm belief that there are no limitations or barriers she can't overcome.

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VIVIANA DIAZ

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## Farewell to the Past and Hello to the Unknown

There are many identities and experiences that we discover and live throughout the phases of our lives. It's beautiful to be aware of the different aspects of our personas. For first-gen college students, it can be helpful to have others open up about being first-gen. There are terms related to the first-gen experience, like survivor's guilt, imposter syndrome, and college culture shock, that might not be familiar to all first-gen students. I did not know culture shock was considered a thing in college, only in traveling. You recognize and relate to these terms and you say, "Yes, that is what I felt too."

Understanding more about first-gen experiences can teach us to use any doubts we may have as strengths, to mitigate common first-gen challenges, and to be proud of where we came from. My mother and my aunt had no idea how to guide me in my education journey; however, they supported me in the best way they knew how. I filled out my own applications and forms. I translated for both of them to get help from the state. As a first-gen student and an only child, I had to figure a lot out on my own—both in school and at work—but it has made me a strong and independent woman.

There are many things that I found out about too late, and that I wish I had known about earlier to be able to take advantage of. I missed various opportunities that opened doors right out of high school. I remember looking back into my emails from UC Santa Barbara and other schools. It reminded me of how far I wanted to go, but I didn't keep showing the campus interest. I sometimes feel as if I failed myself with other routes I could have chosen. I didn't apply to CSU Long Beach because I dreamt of going out of town for a bit only to end up down the street at Long Beach Community College. Life is full of irony. However, the way I look at it, I got to stay close to my family as they're getting older. I strongly believe that things happen for a reason, and I trust the process.

One thing I remember is taking AP classes in my senior year of high school. Why? If I would have known, I would have taken more advantage of those AP classes. I am still glad I took them though. My counselor told me little by little all the cool pins and lanyards you can wear at graduation. Luckily, I got to wear a few. I graduated with cool pins, a lanyard, and a medal I received from ROTC. However, I would have loved to know at the start of high school to take advantage of all the things I wanted to try out. As a first-gen student, you are often confused and lost on where to start. You want to know what options you have, and so you ask questions. Some counselors will go the extra mile and help you brainstorm, but there are other counselors who do not have the best patience and will want to choose your classes quickly. Many of us have to learn along the way after trial and error along with failures.

There are many other big challenges first-gen students face: financial limitations, time constraints, family expectations, and cultural practices, to name a few. The key is to keep prospering after facing so many challenges while pursuing your education. When others are trying to tear you down, that is where your strengths and character come in. There are various motives that drive us first-gen students to continue on our journey. To be educated and

knowledgeable is to have power. Knowledge that is implemented is power.

In conclusion, it is enlightening to consider all the many backgrounds of successful first-gen students. As a first gen, I have felt the anxiety build up as assignments roll through and time management becomes hard with full time work. However, it just gives me motivation to want to do it all. You can achieve a lot more if you use your challenges as fuel. You are your own story, and it is amazing. Opportunities are limitless in this world. There are many resources and forms of assistance out there, so surpass any doubt over whether you should keep going or not. No one can take your education away from you.