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In the Wild

Abstract

Kaylee Rodas is a first-generation college student who did not understand the term “first-gen” until after high school. After enrolling in a first-gen focused study abroad program in Durham, England, her circle was expanded as she was introduced to new people, places, and cultures. Throughout the experience, Rodas encountered common first-gen challenges, including culture shock, imposter syndrome, and survivor’s guilt. She writes this piece hoping it will connect with other first-gen students who may be struggling with these feelings at home or abroad.

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KAYLEE RODAS

In the Wild

I'm in a room in Durham, England filled with mixed emotions and thinking about all the many different variations of what being "first-gen" is. It was not until after high school that I began to consider this term. I walk the road of being one of the first college graduates in my family. I have control over my path, but it can also impact the generations after me; who I am will have an impact on society, whether good or bad. Before coming to England, I did not realize the cultural shocks I would encounter, down to the food we ate and how different it is than what we eat at home, but the main reason I enrolled in this program was to experience life outside my day-to-day life. This trip took me outside my circle and gave me a different perspective on how the outside lenses see me.

I want to travel across this roller coaster of opportunities, but sometimes I cannot shake the feeling of being an imposter. Imagine this: you head into a big city, like Newcastle, and you're confronted with the sense of being an outsider. This is something I had never felt before, and being able to recognize that feeling in a second was a wave of: "Omg, this what it feels like to be different." I went into a karaoke bar/restaurant and left it in the span of 10 minutes—maybe even less. The amount of eyes I felt on me and not knowing how to handle the stares. It was a cultural shock experience that brought out my feelings of being an imposter. I do understand that it was a moment I was bound to experience because I did leave my circle. In a way, it's funny because the encounter was also a cultural shock for them too. I realized that while I couldn't control the setting or other people's reactions to me, I could control my reaction; I could have taken a different approach: "Hey, I'm human—stop staring" or "What's your issue?" but in the end it was just both parties curiously staring.

I shouldn't be feeling like an imposter on this trip, but in that moment I did. And beyond the imposter syndrome and culture shock, I also experienced survivor's guilt; whenever I called my parents, I was reminded that I was beyond lucky to have been given this chance. But in the end, I know I deserve to be here. If I had let these doubts take control, I would still be in L.A. dreaming of exploring. Instead, I jumped into the wave of "first" to travel to a different country and experience diverse cultures.