

Bridget Valenzuela
California State University, Los Angeles

A Love Letter to Us

Abstract

“A Love Letter to Us” is a personal narrative by first-gen scholar, Bridget Valenzuela, composed during her time at Durham University, where she participated in a study abroad program. When presented with the assignment of writing about her experiences in higher education, she felt it was only right to share the best adventure of all as it was happening in real time. This narrative encapsulates the joyful experiences and relationships Valenzuela created while embarking on a journey with other first-gen scholars.

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BRIDGET VALENZUELA

A Love Letter to Us

A vivid imagination is something I've possessed for as long as I can remember. Realism was never a feasible outlook on things for me. Why tackle reality with logic and sense when one could choose optimism and magic? I used to think growing up and growing old was the coolest thing a person could do. You could make your own choices. Eat chocolate for dinner. Who cares? That was until I found out how deprived some adults are of magic. I'm not talking about fantastical magic; I'm talking about the little things such as joy. Because isn't that what magic is? Seeing the beautiful and special things in the most mundane of moments. Getting to know a person inside and out, understanding what makes them cry, laugh, and tick. There's nothing more magical than connection, so as I sit here writing the first draft of my narrative at 2 AM in London, I have to consider what this experience has taught me. There's nothing more magical than finding a sense of connection in a group of perfect strangers.

It's a rare thing to feel fully accepted for who you are. It's even rarer to bring a group together and have everyone form a familial bond, but being here with these individuals has reinforced what I have known about love and friendship all my life. Their appreciation and support have allowed me to blossom and show the parts of myself reserved only for those I deeply trust.

To understand why going abroad with a bunch of students who share similar backgrounds to mine is so special, it's important to understand where I come from. I was born in Rosarito, Baja California Mexico in 1996. I was raised between there and Ensenada for most of my childhood. My parents separated while I was only a toddler and while I wish I could say that had little effect on me, I fear that would be a lie. Their separation mainly gave me a sense of not belonging anywhere. It didn't help that I moved from place to place pretty frequently. On both sides, I had a pretty big family, but I never felt like I fully belonged to either. I always felt that I stuck out like a sore thumb, and I struggled to connect with my relatives despite their best attempts at making me feel included. I have a total of nine siblings. The one I'm closest to is my sister. The rest are much older than me, and the relationship is a little different. A lot of my life I felt like an only child. All of my siblings were well into their adult years when I was growing up and my sister, having a different dad, went to live with that side of the family. That was very lonely for me.

I've never struggled to make friends. I'm a pretty social person, and I gravitate towards people easily. My mentor called this my superpower. He told me I could bring people together and that's a gift. I agree with the last bit. Though, truthfully, it doesn't always work out in my favor. I won't divulge too much of that, since this piece is joyful and close to my heart, but even with the plethora of friendships I have in my life, I've dealt with the feeling of solitude. Mainly because a lot of people don't understand what being "the first" means.

Being "first generation" comes with its own set of distinctive problems, some that make you feel like you're all on your own, but I've found as of late that solitude is a choice. Maybe not one you're actively making—it's hard to find a community with people who have

been forced to make decisions and figure things out all on their own. You find they're not as easily open about their struggles. They tend to bottle them up in order to move forward. Hustle culture is prevalent among those who don't come from privilege. There's a different kind of pressure to succeed when you're the first. You set the example. You can't disappoint. If you fail, you're not only failing yourself; you're also failing all your loved ones who are counting on you.

Facing that kind of pressure can be enough to keep someone sheltered away and unavailable to form new bonds. But even if they're willing to explore them, it's hard to be present when your mind is flooded with pressure coming from every which way. This is why connecting has been hard. We're so often put on autopilot and killing ourselves for our work that forming relationships is the last thing on our minds. We also tend to accept whatever we receive and take it at face value. If there's one thing I'd like to take from all that I've learned while abroad, it is the importance of being open when it comes to allowing people into your space and inviting people you connect with into your life. Love is the strongest force in our world. There's no form of love stronger than that of friendship and family.

On this trip, I felt embraced and peaceful. This is due to the overwhelming love and acceptance I've experienced within the group. There are no expectations from anyone. I can simply exist, let my inner child out, and embrace my femininity. I guard this part of myself in the highest form. I've come to find out only a select few are privileged enough to know my soft and gentle side. Those who won't abuse it. This group in particular are some of the select few who get to see me for me. We're all so different, yet we share the bond of our experiences as first-gen, which keeps us in a tight-knit safety net headed by our professor who has facilitated a nurturing space for us. The people in our little community make it what it is. The most special aspect of this little adventure has been getting to know everyone on a deeper level. Creating those bonds that will surely last a lifetime (you're not rid of me, besties). The best part about being first-gen has not only been the resilience gained from thousands of solo experiences, but finding this beautiful community of people who, despite all our differences, have learned how to love each other better than most families.

Dysfunction and all. My favorite moments while abroad have not been seeing historical sites that I never once before in my life imagined I'd get to see, but the little moments of beauty evoked by a friend revealing the deepest part of their souls, raw emotions flooding out as they bared their deepest secrets in my dorm room; or singing along to my favorite songs in the kitchen with everyone as we turned in for the night; sending friends on scavenger hunts to find who was blasting music in our building at midnight (even when I knew exactly who it was); sharing the details of why pink is my favorite color while drunk on the patio.

I never felt like I was allowed to embrace my feminine side when I was younger. Women who loved pink and dressing in frilly dresses and pretty bows aren't considered academic. Even though I've always been a girl's girl at heart, I rejected that side of me for a while to appear smart. Turns out I never needed to do that. I am smart, bows in my hair and all. As a member of three honor societies and a student with a 3.9 GPA, I realized I didn't have anything to prove to anyone. I simply get to exist. Us Elle Woods of the world get the job done even in our perfectly coordinated pink suits. The conversations I've had with this group have put a lot into perspective. Even at twenty-seven years old, there's still so much I haven't learned about myself, and it's been a privilege getting to learn more about me alongside this band of troublemakers. We're often so stuck trying to fit into societal molds that we lose

the essence of our being. I've taken a long hard look at who I am. I'm a first-generation university student. I'm a Latina. I'm a film director. I'm a friend. I'm a daughter. I'm a sister. I'm a lover. Occasionally a fighter. I'm resilient. All of these things exist within me. I can be all of these things at once.

So yes, I could use my time in this narrative talking infinitely about the many challenges I went through to get here. Believe me, there have been more than I can count off the top of my head, but I'd rather focus on what an unforgettable experience this has been. How special this trip has been and how important it is for other first-gen students to find a network to lean on for support. Having these moments and conversations has been transformative. I don't feel like I'm the same person I was when I got on the plane. I feel more at peace and more confident than ever before. I have that safety net with me of like-minded individuals I know I can count on for anything. I've also learned not to take anything less than what I want. We all deserve to reach for the stars and know our dreams are attainable. All we have to do is believe in ourselves and put in that work we're so used to doing. To end my piece, I'd like to share one of my favorite quotes.

“To the stars through adversity.”