

# STETSON

U N I V E R S I T Y M A G A Z I N E

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# ENSURING SUCCESS

First-generation students are putting their university to the test — and with high grades.

# PERSONIFYING FIRST GEN

Meet seven students who are defying college odds and, in effect, multiplying the chances of success for others — while also putting their university to the test.

BY MICHAEL CANDELARIA

**F**irst Gen — as in the first generation in their family to attend college. Even that moniker carries a measure of misunderstanding or at least the need for clarification. The definition can be complicated. According to both the Center for First-Generation Student Success and the U.S. Department of Education, being a first-generation student means your parents (or legal guardian) did not complete a four-year college or university degree, even if other members of the family have. Further, many colleges and universities consider students with parents who attended international universities as First Gen. That includes Stetson.

At the same time, some colleges have different definitions. As a result, to begin with, the national landscape is uneven.

In addition, student resources on campuses are often tied to those designations, magnifying their importance, with accessibility of support and aid at issue. Historically, the First Gen population benefits from fewer financial resources than other students.

Then there are the inherent challenges of simply being first. Often, First Gen students feel alone in their experiences, with family members being unable to relate to college. And some students feel a sense of shame because they have taken on a First Gen identity.

More than with many other students, questions are apt to abound — generally, what to do and how to do it without any substantial insight from home.

As a First Gen student, maybe you remember your earliest days on a college campus.

Nationally, one in three undergraduates identify as first-generation, and those numbers are expected to increase in the near future, with the pipeline of first-time undergraduates heavily weighted with First Gen students. Meanwhile, First Gen success typically carries intergenerational impact, with successful college completion being a significant predictor of educational, job

and life achievement for the families of graduates.

Not coincidentally, the prevailing belief is that institutions of higher education must shift their mindsets and priorities to better serve First Gen students in order to survive, thrive and meet their missions.

Is that happening at Stetson?

During this spring's semester, there are 700 first-generation students on the DeLand campus, representing more than 25% of the student body, according to Stetson's Office of Institutional Research & Effectiveness.

Seven of those students share their personal stories, as well as perceptions about their university in terms of ensuring success.

## DAVIS BROWN: 'I WILL FINISH'

When Davis Brown arrived on campus last August from Niceville High in the Florida Panhandle, much was on his mind – but not the least of which was making it past his junior year. His mother and father had tried, as did his older brother, all unsuccessfully. In each case, life intervened, making Brown a First Gen student by Stetson's definition.

Even from the outset, Brown was confident about his choice of Stetson, and with his chosen major of music composition (with a primary focus in voice). He was attracted to the campus by virtue of its intimacy, particularly the low student-to-teacher ratio, and he had received a handsome scholarship. Further, a choral singer in high school, he survived the rigors of an arduous audition and admission process into the School of Music. In his words, the overall setting "really felt like home."

On the other hand, he was challenged by, as he describes, a simple concept: "realizing that you're an adult now."

"I still had the high school impression of like, 'OK, I'm going to go home and I'm just going to do nothing, and I could just play video games or something like that,'" he remembers thinking last fall. "... I've realized that I have to do so much more and that, you know, I'm accountable for a lot of things that I have to keep track of."

As a First Gen student, Brown had to learn the nuances of college largely for himself. In essence, while first-year students can have it tough on any campus, it's likely even tougher for First Gens.

Now in his second semester, Brown is making progress, particularly with self-reliance, both in class and around campus.

"It was a bit of an emotional process to really realize that I have this entire school filled with people meant for connections rather than just having a small clique," he says. "... Learning to be comfortable with myself and not having to rely on a small friend group to keep myself sane."

Brown sings the university's praises, commenting that "Stetson is very, very helpful." Yet, mostly, in a sure sign of growth, he's finding his own way.

"I've already faced more challenges than I even expected," he concludes. "But I will finish. ... The only thing I can do is really just stay positive and make sure I'm doing the best that I can."



Davis Brown

## MIA TEJEDA: 'NEEDED TO FIND OUT BY MYSELF'

Mia Tejada is the oldest of three siblings in a family from the Dominican Republic. The home setting had always been close-knit and traditional – with one notable exception. Tejada left at age 16 to spend her final year of high school with an uncle in Tampa (Riverview High). And now she's the first in the family to attend a U.S. college.

While both parents went to a version of college in the Dominican Republic, it was more like secondary school, says Tejada, describing the experience as “totally different” from Stetson and adding that her parents “didn't have any idea about how [U.S. college] works.”

“I needed to find out by myself,” she continues.

Despite being on campus only since last August, Tejada has already *found out*. A marketing and professional sales major with a minor in data science, she is exploring career choices in the



Mia Tejada

School of Business Administration. Also, she is the finance director for the Latinx Student Union. Plus, she's a Stetson student ambassador, as well as a social media ambassador for the university, among other activities. That's all in year one.

“Even now, when I talk about my classes to my parents, they're like, ‘Oh, wow. They're already preparing you already for a career?’ They didn't have that [experience],” Tejada says, citing that her father is a bank notary and her mother works in marketing.

Tejada credits Stetson's Woke Independent Student Empowerment Program for her immediate success. WISE promotes leadership development and mentorship, particularly during a student's first year on campus. Its mission is to foster encouragement and support for full-time first-year students of color, including Black/African Americans, Chicanx/Hispanic/Latinx, Asian/Asian Americans, Native Americans, Hawaiian/Pacific Islanders, and Multi-Ethnic, or those who may identify as underrepresented, marginalized and/or under-resourced.

“I would not be in the place I am right now if it weren't for WISE, their leaders and my mentor [Ari Thompson], who played a key part of me being successful in the campus,” she asserts.

Tejada believes she couldn't have asked for more after Stetson's presence kept continually popping up online as she was researching colleges. “Every time I tried to search, Stetson would appear, and I was just like, ‘Why not apply?’” she remembers. “There was no college that gave me as much attention as Stetson. And from the beginning, after I was accepted, if I needed something I would just call and they would pick up.”

Tejada's own attention to detail regarding education is no accident. It wasn't an easy move to leave home as a teenager, but she did in hopes of greater opportunities.

“I want to get a better education. I want to have options,” she says, pointing to a possible career in marketing, public relations or media.

“I was like, ‘OK, this is the market for me; the U.S. is the dominant market for media. I want to go there. I want to find out.’”

In turn, Tejada is already contributing to the campus culture at Stetson, one she describes as “very calm” and where “you can succeed very easily if you really want to.”

“The amount of resources Stetson gives you, and the personalized attention you get from Stetson, is not something I would waste,” she comments.

As such, her biggest challenge so far isn't what to do and how to do it. The hurdle is time management, as in trying not to do too much.

“There's so many things that you could do at Stetson that you sometimes get too overwhelmed, and you have to learn how to drop some,” Tejada concludes. “That's my biggest challenge.”

## ISAAC MENDEZ: 'THOUGHT I WAS JUST GOING TO COLLEGE'

Isaac Mendez's mother immigrated to the United States when she was 14, leaving Mexico and her family behind to live with an older sister in California. She didn't finish middle school and, seeking the American dream, she initially worked as a babysitter and in the agricultural fields of California.

Mendez's father, also a field worker originally from Mexico, didn't attend school after the sixth grade.

With that as the backdrop, Mendez would find his way to Stetson and then to California for ABRCMS — the Annual Biomedical Research Conference for Minoritized Scientists.

Following a family move, Mendez was born and raised in Prince George's County, Maryland, not far from the nation's capital, where he began to realize his own opportunities. Attending Bladensburg High School, with a student population primarily of color, he excelled, even obtaining a license to be a Certified Nursing Assistant. And, largely inspired by his mother's bold decision as a teenager, he "always wanted to have a big move."

That meant college and, ultimately, would mean Stetson.

"I wanted to have something new where I could start, where I could flourish within my own self, try to figure out who I am and try to just find my identity," says Mendez, who has a sister 12 years younger.

In researching colleges, Mendez had used several online platforms, and "Stetson one day just popped up in my email." Stetson checked all of his requisite boxes, including a warm climate, strong financial aid and, later, a surprise campus setting.

In 2019, his first visit was on a Hatter Saturday, a student-recruiting event held in the spring. Also, it marked his first

visit to Florida. Mendez quickly was sold.

"I thought [the campus] was beautiful," he remembers. "I thought it was a different scene. ... It was just trees and very tropical. It felt like home. ... So that same day, I was like, 'Yeah, I'm going to be a student here.'"

As it turned out, Mendez became much more than a student. Majoring in health sciences and under the guidance of Heather Evans Anderson, PhD, assistant professor of health science, Mendez has conducted research about functions of the heart. Most recently, he studied the effects of vitamin D on the hearts of marine invertebrates. Plus, with the help of a scholarship from the American Society For Microbiology, he presented his work at the 2022 ABRCMS Conference in Anaheim, California. (Notably, Anderson, whom Mendez considers his mentor, also was a First Gen student.)

"My goal is to be able to be a heart specialist for a lot of patients who suffer heart disease, but also have a research background and be able to do clinical and research work," he says.

Mendez just never thought he would be dissecting hearts at Stetson. His words: "No, I didn't, I thought I was just going to college, and I would take the classes required for medical school. ... I never thought I was going to do a hands-on-type research like I've done."

Graduating this May, Mendez looks back and thanks his mother.

"She always instilled education being a priority," he says. "She believed that's the way to be able to make a mark in the world. ... Her family was unable to give that opportunity to her. She wanted to be able to give that opportunity to her kids."



Isaac Mendez



Brooke O'Brien

## BROOKE O'BRIEN: 'HAVEN'T FAILED YET'

National statistics reveal that being a first-generation student comes with inherent disadvantages. In the case of Brooke O'Brien, her arrival at Stetson last August came with additional obstacles: She is mostly bound to a wheelchair.

Seven years ago, during a surgery to address scoliosis, more damage was actually done — now preventing O'Brien from experiencing the mere comfort of walking on campus. She is approximately 95% immobile.

Further, O'Brien was home-schooled without the benefit of classmates, and her parents have roughly a year of college experience combined.

"The first few weeks were nerve-racking, and I'd never been on my own either," says O'Brien, who lives in nearby Orange City following early moves from Ohio and Virginia. Her mother and stepfather raised her along with a younger brother. Her biological father lives in Ohio; she doesn't know him well.

O'Brien remembers her first day on campus, Aug. 12, 2022. "I had a bunch of thoughts," she continues. "One was 'This is so exciting.' Another thought was 'I cannot do this. I'm going to fail here.' But I haven't failed yet."

O'Brien is majoring in psychology but also is considering philosophy. She's in the midst of exploration.

"I just really wanted to agree on something [as a major]. I guess psychology right now," she says. "... My mom always encouraged me to go to college because she said one of her biggest regrets was not finishing college."

And, yes, there are physical accessibility issues around campus, O'Brien says, while insisting they aren't a predominant concern. "Everyone's very nice. Everyone's always helpful," she says.

"People here are really helpful, which is good."

Special praise goes to Joshua Rust, PhD, a professor of philosophy. O'Brien tells the story of an elevator in Davis Hall not working, forcing O'Brien to miss class. Rust responded to her apologetic email with instant action and a message of "no, no, no, don't apologize." The elevator was promptly fixed, and Rust changed his classroom to better accommodate her.

Mostly, though, O'Brien isn't seeking to be singled out. She chose Stetson because "it's a small school close to home and a big school would've been way too overwhelming." Also, she wanted a place where she could grow.

To that end, she has become more assertive, she adds, noting that "I'm not a very assertive person, but sometimes you have to be. You have to change." As an illustration of exploration, she participates in *Touchstone*, Stetson's literary and arts journal for students.

"I've made a lot of friends here," O'Brien says. "And I'm doing pretty well in my classes. ... I've met a lot of people with different experiences, different majors, all that good stuff."

*All* represents a today that is allowing O'Brien to think about tomorrow, perhaps attending law school.

O'Brien even has advice for future First Gen students: "I would say definitely go out to the events and the tabling [students showcasing various clubs/activities on campus]. Try to join some organizations, because getting a lot of friends here has really been the biggest help to me."

## LEONARDO GIORGIONI: 'SHATTERED MY PLANS, BUT FOR THE BETTER'

Leonardo Giorgioni, born to a mother and father from Venezuela and Italy, respectively, and who grew up in Spain, sought to see a “completely different culture.”

With that desire, plus the help of a good scholarship and GO Campus, Giorgioni arrived at Stetson this January. GO Campus is an organization that identifies college options for international students.

“I felt like staying in Europe was going to be more of the past 18 years,” explains Giorgioni, who attended a globally diverse secondary school in Spain and began learning English at age 2. “I felt like I was going to grow up a lot more [in the United States].”

Yet, Giorgioni arrived alone and with virtually no insight about college life or America. His father, now a marketer and entrepreneur, had taken university-type classes in Italy for only a few weeks. His mother never got the chance. Growing up, she was told her early passion, writing, “would never get her anywhere.”

Not only was Giorgioni a first-generation college student, but also from far abroad. And, although his parents “really wanted” their only child to attend college,

he had so much to learn.

“I came here with zero expectations for what it was going to be like,” he says, less than two months after stepping on campus. “Coming here was definitely mind-blowing.

“I came here with a mindset that, OK, I'm going to be alone; I'll focus on my classes and, you know, do my own thing. And then I just realized how many people are here and how many things there are to do. It kind of shattered my plans, but for the better.”

Majoring in psychology, Giorgioni is observing his surroundings and responding to new information by, in essence, asking for more of it.

“There's so much support. I'm just comparing things to how it was back in high school because that's the only experience I have. And there is definitely so many things around [the campus],” he says.

A newcomer, Giorgioni concedes he's by no means an expert about college, but he's trying to get there.

His view: “I'm in a new country as an international student, and my parents have never [attended a] university. So, I have to concentrate. And, yeah, you do. But that's not all. If you want to experience a university, I feel you have to let yourself free to be able to do whatever you are offered. Just say, ‘Yes, cool.’ That's my main thing.”

## FIRST GEN IN LIFE AND RESEARCH

A former first-generation college student, Joanne Morales Bembinster didn't have it easy growing up.

In her senior year of high school, she describes, “My whole life fell apart.”

In the end, she was fortunate enough to find mentors and friends to guide and support her through the troubling times. And she believes her education at Florida Gulf Coast University “changed my life.”

In part, those early experiences are fueling Bembinster's current research and work to help First Gen students. She is Stetson's director of Academic Success and an adjunct instructor of professional communications in the School of Business Administration.

In May, she hopes to complete her studies in Stetson's post-master's/pre-doctoral Education Specialist (EDS) program, where her thesis explores the advising experiences of First Gen students on campus. The related research, which included interviewing some 20 enrolled students on campus, delivered both affirmation and new insight.

Bembinster sees a lot of positives in her research, too — with universities such as Stetson now recognizing this especially diverse group as dynamic and resilient.

“The experiences that they're bringing to our campus is rich,” she says. “So, nationally we're seeing a big shift, and I think that's where Stetson is really jumping into that part of the story — to where we are saying: ‘Welcome; we open our doors; we want to help guide and support you; and we will help change your life and for the next generations.’”



Joanne Morales Bembinster



Leonardo Giorgioni



Kristine Lynn Rodriguez

### **KRISTINE LYNN RODRIGUEZ: 'FIND YOUR CONNECTION'**

Kristine Lynn Rodriguez represents anomalies in multiple ways. She's an only child whose parents come from very large families. Her parents both hailed from the Philippines, but they didn't meet until coming to the United States and working in the same industry, food concessions. Also, Rodriguez, a sophomore, is a first-generation student and, uncommonly, a commuter student from nearby Orange City.

After coming to the U.S., Rodriguez's mother, who never attended high school, was a nanny. Her father completed his associate degree in the Philippines. Both traveled extensively as concessionaires, following large-scale events and sports like NASCAR, until meeting and ultimately settling in Volusia County, where Rodriguez spent her entire life.

At University High in Orange City, Rodriguez was a good student, but she also carried an important advantage.

Her mother became employed at Stetson, as a custodian at the Lynn Business Center, which meant Rodriguez could attend the university tuition-free. (Her mother, Rusalyn Rodriguez, remains a Stetson employee.) By virtue of the university's Tuition Benefits policy, Rodriguez started in August 2021 as a biology major on a pre-health track just as the COVID-19 pandemic was ebbing.

Today, she wants to take care of the young.

"I'm not sure what specifically, if it's going to be medical school or being a [Physician's Assistant] or dentistry, I just want to specialize in pediatrics," says Rodriguez, who added an anthropology minor last fall. "I really want to work with kids and have that comfort and connection to help them. They're not fully responsible or aware of their health. I think educating and caring for them is one big thing I really want to do."

In addition, Rodriguez has immersed herself in campus life, even as a commuter student. She helps to promote Stetson's Asian Pacific American Coalition, handling public relations and marketing. The organization strives to raise cultural awareness on campus of the Asian continent and Pacific Islands. Also, she's the secretary for the Alpha Chi Omega sorority.

Such participation has brought a sense of belonging.

"It was kind of hard finding that [campus] connection at first because I was just in and out of campus [as a commuter student]," she says. "... But joining and being connected in organizations, I feel like you're able to find your connection with everyone."

Meanwhile, Rodriguez found her fit in the classroom.

"I love studying life science, and I really love like the labs and lab reports we do in biology," she comments. "I love the biology department — nice and open professors that I'm able to talk to and receive advice."

In essence, the campus serves as a safety net. "It's all about being communicative and being comfortable, not feeling like there's a bad question. Your professors and the lab assistants and your peers are here to help you because we're all learning together," she adds.

Rodriguez shares her own advice, too, for others who might someday sit in her seat as a First Gen commuter student.

"Don't be afraid," she says. "There's always going to be someone to help support you. ... It kind of feels like a heavy thing on your shoulders when you're the first one out of your family [to attend college]. You have this pressure. But you also have this opportunity, and it's a really big thing. ... Your family will support you, even though you might sometimes not think so."



## FIRST GEN AT STETSON

(DeLand Campus – 2,742 Total Students)

25.53% First Gen  
61% Female / 39% Male

56.93% Non-First Gen

17.54% Unknown

### Ethnic Composition

13.6% Black or African American

27.6% Hispanic/Latino

7% U.S. Nonresident

42.6% White

9.2%\* Other Race/Ethnicity

\*Contains students from the following small populations: Asian, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, two or more Races, and race/ethnicity unknown

Source: Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness, Spring 2023 Semester

## JAIMY LEE COTTO DE JESÚS: 'RESPONSE THAT I WAS LOOKING FOR'

Jaimy Lee Cotto De Jesús openly concedes that until moving to the continental U.S. from Puerto Rico as a fifth-grader she didn't know there was anything beyond middle school. No one in her family, to her knowledge, had finished that level.

"It was a big thing for me to even finish middle school. It was even bigger for me to finish high school. And it's tremendous that I even got here to college," says De Jesús, whose parents separated when she was very young.

There were challenges, too, for De Jesús to get past that fifth grade. She remembers being dropped off at her new school that year in Rochester, New York, where her mother had moved. De Jesús didn't speak English and "had to kind of find my way through."

She returned to Puerto Rico during middle school before eventually graduating from Pine Ridge High in nearby Deltona. She had more than found a "way through," graduating in 2021 after being active in the school's Junior ROTC program, dabbling in student government and asserting herself in several other clubs.

What's more, De Jesús inspired her sister, two years younger, and brother, three years younger, who observed her accomplishments. "My sister was going to drop out in high school, and she saw me graduate and she just felt that she could do it too," comments De Jesús, adding her brother now plans to attend Stetson.

That success brought her to Stetson in fall 2022, following a gap, and De Jesús hasn't slowed her achievement. A marketing major, she's already on the executive committee of the campus Latinx Student Union as the director of community engagement. About her Latinx group, she touts "it's for everyone," not solely for Latins. And she's a university student ambassador.

Surprisingly, De Jesús draws parallels from her earliest days at Stetson to the "culture shock" of fifth grade in a new country. "I couldn't figure out where I was going back then," she says. "And then it was the same thing here. I was very homesick for the first week, that's for sure."



Jaimy Lee Cotto De Jesús

Nonetheless, characteristically, she is persevering.

"At first, I thought I was going to have to really deal with this on my own, but it was also one of the reasons why I chose Stetson," she continues. "I felt very welcomed. And I felt like, as a First Gen student, I would have support here in the university. When I expressed my concerns, they were all met with a response that I was looking for."

In particular, De Jesús credits the WISE program for her rapid acclimation, noting, "I had that additional support to help me through this process, not only as a First Gen student, but also as a Latin student and a woman of color."

Eventually, De Jesús found that same comfort in marketing. She began as a discovery major, but marketing "called to me," she describes.

Now, with her brother eyeing life as a future Hatter, can De Jesús convince her sister to follow suit? Her immediate response: "We're trying."