

The Impact of First-Year Seminars on First-Generation Students

Nolan Schultheis (00:04):

Welcome to the Center for Engaged Learning special series on first year seminars featuring guest hosts from the Elon University Masters of Higher Education Program.

Lauren Feeley (00:18):

In the last episode, we explored the impact of first year seminars on first generation students. In this episode from Elon University's Center for Engaged Learning, we're talking to Megan, an alum of a large state school and a first generation college student. I'm your host, Lauren Feeley. Megan, welcome.

Megan (00:37):

Hi. Thanks for having me.

Lauren Feeley (00:39):

Today we're going to talk about your experiences in college. What were some of the biggest challenges you faced during your transition to college life, both academically and socially?

Megan (00:49):

Probably the biggest thing was learning how to navigate things on my own and just being very independent and kind of lacking that structure with classes and studying and things like that. And then also having to make all new friends. And a lot of times I felt like I didn't fit in because my friends had a lot of knowledge about what to do, and I just felt very clueless.

Lauren Feeley (01:10):

Did you participate in a first year seminar, and if so, what aspects were most helpful for you to support your success?

Megan (01:17):

Yes, I did. I did. It was called Activism 101, and I took it in my spring semester of my first year. It really opened my eyes to a lot of things that I just wasn't aware of or haven't been exposed to, and so got to just start thinking about things a little bit differently about new topics. A lot of it was based on volunteering and just helping the community, so that became something that was really important for me going forward, but I wish it would've exposed me to more things for college success, like college level writing, engaging with my peers, actually talking with my faculty, things like that.

Lauren Feeley (01:54):

What other resources or support systems like mentorship or peer groups or certain professors maybe made the biggest difference in your college experience?

Megan (02:04):

One of the biggest things was I was part of a scholarship program for first generation students from low income families, and so I had an advisor through that program, which was really valuable. I knew I

always had someone to ask questions if I needed to, and then I was also paired with a graduate student mentor through that program, but that was the first year, and that made a big difference. But it was something that I felt like I still needed support beyond my first year, but that kind of ended abruptly.

Lauren Feeley (02:35):

How did your identity as a first gen student shape your sense of belonging?

Megan (02:40):

I felt very clueless, and I felt like a lot of my friends just knew what to do. They knew where to go, knew who to ask, things like that, and I felt very lost. I also felt like I didn't have any direction for what I wanted to do career wise and major wise, so I felt like I just had a lot to figure out on my own without direction. And then I also came from a low income background, so a lot of my friends had money to go and do things. They had their cars on campus, and I felt like I couldn't engage in a lot of things that they could afford to.

Lauren Feeley (03:11):

So what advice would you give institutions or future first gen students to help support their success during the first year of college and beyond?

Megan (03:20):

I think something that would've really, really helped me was having a first year seminar. I liked the first year seminar that I was with, but if that was tailored to students like me first gens, I think it would've been more impactful. And then also a living learning community. I think that would've been really nice. More intentional mentorship that was set up for future years and just more structured support. I think I really could have benefited from that.

Lauren Feeley (03:47):

Thanks for sharing your experience, Megan.

Nolan Schultheis (03:54):

This series is produced by Elon University's Center for Engaged Learning. Learn more about first year seminars and other engaged learning topics at www.centerforengagedlearning.org.

Lauren Feeley (04:08):

On the next episode, Sara Chilton will explore how first year seminars impact international students.