

Views From the West

SPA Professors Share Experiences as First-Generation College Students

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Adjusting to college life poses challenges for every incoming freshman, but they can be especially daunting for those whose parents did not receive education beyond a high school diploma. SPA faculty members Callie Rennison, Lonnie Schaible and John Ronquillo (not pictured) know those challenges firsthand.

The three talked about their journeys to academia at a panel for first-gen students on Feb. 17, 2015, that was co-hosted by SPA and CU Denver's TRiO offices. The panel members discussed the importance of supportive faculty members.



“Come talk to us,” said Professor Rennison. “We know what you’re going through because we’ve been there.”

The panel also talked about the valuable perspectives that first-generation students and other students from non-traditional backgrounds bring to education. SPA will help to launch a First-Gen Network of faculty, staff and students this fall.

According to a 2010 study by the Department of Education, some 50 percent of the college population is made up of first-gen students. The National Center for Education Statistics found in 2010 that the proportion of first-gen students is particularly high among minority students: 48.5 percent of Latino and Hispanic students, 45 percent of Black or African-American, 35 percent of Native American, and 32 percent for students of Asian descent. In comparison, students who identified themselves as Caucasian comprise 28 percent of first-gen college students.

“It’s really a different cultural experience when someone who’s a first-generation student comes to college,” according to Teresa Heinz Housel, associate professor of communication at Hope College in Holland, Mich., and first-gen college student. “They’re not just entering a school; they’re entering an academic, cultural environment that often has a lot of unspoken rules and sets of cultural mores. There might be assumptions that a student has experiences or knowledge that they might not necessarily [have] if they’re coming from a first-generation background.

“Among the challenges I’ve seen are developing study skills, how to ask questions in class, and how and where to ask for help if they need it.

For more information, visit the CU Denver [TRiO](#) website.