

THERESA LADRIGAN-WHELPLEY: Welcome to INTEGRAL, a podcast production out of the Ignatian Center for Jesuit Education at Santa Clara University exploring the question: is there a common good in our common home? I'm Theresa Ladrigan-Whelpley, the director of the Bannan Institutes in the Ignatian Center and your host for this podcast.

We're coming to you from Vari Hall on the campus of Santa Clara in the heart of Silicon Valley, California. This season of INTEGRAL, we're looking at the ways in which issues of economic justice intersect with the question of the common good. Today we'll be investigating economic justice and higher education. What are the barriers and bridges for first-generation college students today? What supports are necessary? Does the Jesuit Catholic mission of a place like Santa Clara University uniquely shape the experience of first-generation college students?

AUDIO CLIP: Everyone else seemed to have an instruction manual in the form of their parents where I kinda, I winged it.

LAURA NICHOLS: Today, the social class you are born into is the greatest predictor of your likelihood of graduating from college. The success of our students in graduating with the necessary skills and ethical foundations provides a valued good to our communities.

ALMA OROZCO: And I would always ask myself: why is it so different? Which can't all the people in my community have this opportunity to prosper and attain higher education.

THERESA: TO unpack these questions we're joined today by Laura Nichols, associate professor in the department of sociology and director of the core curriculum at Santa Clara, who also serves as Bannan Institute scholar in the Ignatian Center. Her research focuses on the application of sociology in nonprofit organizations, the study of inequalities, and the experiences of first-generation college students.

Her book, co-authored with Terry-Anne Jones, *Undocumented and in College: Students and Institutions in A Climate of National Hostility*, will be published later this year. Welcome Laura!

LAURA: Thanks Theresa! Today we turn our focus inward somewhat as we will be discussing issues of economic justice within higher education. In particular, I'd like to focus on a students that I have learned so much from during my time as a faculty member at Santa Clara: students who are first in their families to attend college, usually referred to as first-generation college students.

Are you the first in your family to attend college? If not, which generation in your family first received a four-year degree? What allowed this first entrance into college? Was it a part of a structural change that made higher education more accessible to many? Or the result of an individual opportunity, a lucky break perhaps?

Today, the social class you are born into is the greatest predictor of your likelihood of graduating

from college. And although most high schoolers aspire to attend college, only 14% of those in the lowest social classes ultimately graduate, compared to over 60% of those from high income families. In the United States, we have historically considered education the main hope and pathway to social mobility. And that has been true throughout our history. But today, as we see extreme income and wealth inequality taking hold in our country, of course our educational institutions are also affected and are becoming more and more stratified by social class.

This inequality is concerning many policymakers and employers who are observing other countries besting the US in educating its young adults and producing those who have the necessary skills to be employed in today's growing, professional workforce. These structural realities and dynamics raise particular questions for us here at Santa Clara and at universities like Santa Clara.

When first founded, Catholic schools were created to provide an alternative for Catholics, who were discriminated against because of their religion, but also to provide economic and social mobility for these new immigrants, mainly from Europe. In its beginning and into the 1900s, this mainly free K-16 Catholic school system contributed to greatest rates of one generational wealth mobility in the United States.

While Catholic schools have provided for the economic mobility of new immigrants, with few economic resources in the past, today most Catholic schools are very expensive and enroll mainly students whose families have high incomes. New data from the Equality of Opportunity Project shows that many Catholic colleges like Santa Clara enroll very few students who are from low-income families. As a result, our schools are replicating and reproducing the current stratified social class system, rather than providing avenues for social mobility. And while all students who attend selective colleges have worked very hard to earn a spot, it often comes down to the ability to pay or navigate complicated financial aid systems to determine who ultimately is able to attend and graduate.

The irony is that Catholic colleges have all the characteristics that we know from research are the most beneficial for first-generation college students. But we enroll very few students with such backgrounds. Instead, first-generation college students enroll at colleges enroll with some of the lowest completion rates in the nation. And as a result, despite their individual talent, these first-generation students who are high-achieving, usually do not ultimately complete their degrees.

At Santa Clara University, like many Jesuit universities, first generation college students graduate at the same rate as students whose parents have college experience. Today we ask why and what first generation college students need from colleges to graduate and to thrive.

To better understand some of the issues involved, I am joined in conversation with three people from Santa Clara who know a lot about higher education and the experiences of first generation college students.

ERIN KIMURA-WALSH: My name is Erin Kimura-Walsh. I am the director of the LEAD Scholars program which supports first generation college students on the Santa Clara campus.

ALMA OROZCO: Hi, my name is Alma Orozco. I am a senior here at Santa Clara University and also a LEAD scholar.

LORENZO GAMBOA: Hello, my name is Lorenzo Gamboa. I am the senior associate director of Undergraduate Admissions here at Santa Clara University.

LAURA: I thought maybe we could begin by just talking a little bit about first-generation college students and why you think first-generation college students at Santa Clara do so well.

LORENZO: Sure, I'd like to I guess address it from the Undergraduate Admissions office. When we're out there recruiting, we are looking for those candidates that really you know add to the university who can demonstrate that they do have that conscious, competence, compassion to succeed at this institution but most of all to also bring in that fourth C which is the community aspect. I think that's probably the biggest thing that really has, as an alum and a first-generation student myself say, that the community aspect is the biggest thing that did motivate and kept me here as a succeeding student.

ERIN: I think I'll go ahead and add to that. You know I see the students as they're first arriving onto campus echoing this idea of community, the strong community that we have here at Santa Clara both in the way in which first-generation college students support each other, the student community that's there and in place and also the way in which our faculty and staff support our students as well. So, the small classroom environment, the really personalized attention that we pay to students in advising and so many of our interactions really benefits our students.

ALMA: I definitely want to add to that. When I first came into Santa Clara, the first experience I had was coming in for the LEAD Scholars orientation week. So this is a week that all first-gen students that are invited to the LEAD Scholars program are here for a week. They take their English course before the school year starts and we also start to build connections with upperclassmen as well as students that are in our own class. So that definitely I feel helped me build a community and get to know more people before the school year even started. And I felt this comfort that I could express myself and just get to know more people.

LAURA: Do you all think it matters that Santa Clara is a Catholic college? Do you think that plays a role in student success here?

ERIN: We recently conducted a survey of our first-generation college students and found that they are even more so committed to social justice issues, to living out their values in the work that they do, the future career that they may have, than our continuing generation students. And so one thing that kind of struck me was the way in which, you know being a Catholic institution but one that was really you know founded with the social justice values in mind that you know I

think that really resonates with our students, you know. Seeing that in the curriculum, seeing so many opportunities for them to engage in our communities, using their education to see how that can be applied to serving, benefiting the communities that, the underserved communities, that they've come from. I think that really you know provides that connection for students between the education that they're getting here in what we call the Santa Clara bubble and how that can extend to the broader community.

LORENZO: I would add that the space that it does provide on reflection which is sometimes missing at other institutions is I think definitely key.

ALMA: Yeah and I feel like the reflection within the school where it occurs is for example in Campus Ministry on campus provides these retreats where we get to meet students from that are also continuing gen and you get to explore what other people's backgrounds are. So you get to connect, share your story, but also learn about others.

LAURA: Let's talk about the obstacles that there might be for students getting into college.

LORENZO: Well the biggest hurdle for us obviously is financial aid unfortunately. We do get the opportunity to recruit incredible scholars but not always is it financially affordable or something that they can contemplate even working through to make Santa Clara something of an option.

ERIN: I was reflecting on just the logistical complexity on top of the normal admissions process. So if you, you know, kinda think about a continuing generation college student who's thinking about applying to colleges you know, researching colleges, putting together your essay, you know all of those things but on top of that not having a counselor at your school who's available to you because they're serving 500 students. Needing to have fee waivers but trying to figure out how do I get those fee waivers, are they available to me and having to apply for those. Maybe not having a computer at home, not having parents who can you know proofread your essays to college.

So that you know as challenging as the application process is for all of our students, there's this additional kind of layer of challenges for first generation college students depending on their situation.

ALMA: I wanna touch upon the whole idea of intersectionality. So some of us are low-income, some of us are from underserved communities in general. I personally went to an underserved high school and just within the high school we had 2 counselors for 2,000 students. So it just puts in perspective that like the resources were not as available to we had to make a push to try to get the resources we need to even start applying college. I remember I would have, I would be able to make one appointment with a counselor and I had to bring in 33 questions with me to get them all answered before I could even start the application process just going and searching.

And also, the whole idea of expectation versus an option. So for some students, college is an expectation - you're going to go no matter what, start choosing which one you want to go to. Versus in other cases, it's an option it's like oh you can go to college or you can start work right after. Which one do you think would benefit more of your family?

LAURA: So what can students at Santa Clara who aren't first generation college students learn from students who are first generation college students?

ALMA: I could take this one on for a bit. I feel that one big thing that continued gen students is that the person next to them in the classroom does not necessarily share the same background. I feel it's constantly like for example in some of my like sociology classes or psychology classes, we talk about this other world about the underserved communities and that we need to do something to level out the playing field for people that are coming from those communities. But they assume that everyone in the classroom is not from that community so it's like the othered. Whereas the person next to you might have come from that community or may still be in that community.

So just understanding that not necessarily everybody shares the same background and being open to hear about it.

ERIN: You know just thinking a little bit about Alma's comment. You know then I think I just wanna highlight the importance of faculty and staff in creating those spaces where students can share their different experiences. I think that has been kind of one challenge that's you know been experienced by many of my students is we're talking about this issue but we're not talking about the diverse range of opinions, we're not talking about ground rules so that we can have a productive discussion. You know I am the only student of color, one of two students of color, and we're talking about the recent election or we're talking about affirmative action and it's incredibly isolating for me. I feel like a token. I feel silenced in those spaces.

So, while there's so much to be learned from first generation college students, from you know many of our students from kind of marginalized communities, often they don't have the space to be able to share their experience in a way yeah in which you know they can contribute to the classroom.

ALMA: And I feel even adding onto that, there's this sort of pressure that's put on students of color or students of underserved backgrounds where it's like if this is what your experience is, you're speaking for your whole community. You're speaking on behalf of everyone that shares these identities with you whereas it's not necessarily true. It's this is my experience, take it as my experience and not overgeneralize it to the whole population.

LORENZO: I would say just to understand that you know it's just learning from each other and capitalizing on that opportunity that you both gonna help each other as much as possible. You are a network.

LAURA: What is the best advice you've ever gotten about being in college or the advice you'd like to give the most often to students about being in college?

ERIN: Mine is very practical. It's do informational interviews. So I, you know, ended up in this line of work because I was in student activities here, I enjoyed doing that, I saw my staff advisors and I was like that's a cool job: to work with college students all day and did a series of informational interviews kind of exploring the work in this field. And I've seen just the impact that that can have on my students as well, we require them to do informational interviews in our first-year seminar class.

So often, you know I'd say this a lot of things but you don't know what you don't know. And I think that one of the ways that our students can explore career opportunities or the range of things they can do with their major, explore work that they would be fulfilled by is through these informational interviews.

LORENZO: One that I always love to give, especially high schools students cause we talk to a lot of them around the world and it's something that has come down through my ancestry. It says, dime con quién andas, y te diré quien eres; tell me who you hang out with, and I will tell you who you will become. So I always tell them hang around with positive energy and you're gonna go in the right direction. Hang around with wrong influences or wrong energy and you're bound to be stuck with the same.

Another one would be advice that was received by one of our faculty here. Rest in peace, Dr. Ramon Chacon. And he always said remember where your heart lies, remember el corazon, never forget where you came from. Reach back.

And if you're a first generation student listening to this podcast, please do not ever, ever limit your opportunities based on financial need. You don't know what can happen.

LAURA: Wonderful, wonderful thank you everyone.

LORENZO: Thank you!

LAURA: In the late 16th century, secretary to St. Ignatius, Juan Alfonso de Polanco said that, "Those poor boys who are now only students will grow to be pastors, civic officials, administrators of justice, and will fill other important posts to everybody's profit and advantage."

An educated population is necessary for a robust, democratic society. Catholic colleges, with our concern for the whole person, a connection to our local and global communities, personalized instruction and mentorship, and emphasis on understanding and reflection have always provided a means of social mobility for families. The success of our students in graduating with the necessary skills and ethical foundations provides a valued good to our

communities. May we increasingly find ways to continue to live out the historical promise and power of our institutions, for the good of the larger society.

THERESA: Thanks for listening to INTEGRAL, a Bannan Institute podcast of the Ignatian Center for Jesuit Education at Santa Clara University. Special thanks to Professor Laura Nichols for her contribution to today's episode.

Coming up next week is John Ifcher, assistant professor at the economics department at Santa Clara, who will investigate the extent to which current economics instruction teaches students to privilege their own self-interests as the most efficient means to the good.

Technical direction for INTEGRAL was provided by Craig Gower and Fern Silva. Our production manager is Kaylie Erickson. Thanks to Mike Whalen for advisory and editorial support. You can find us on the web at scu.edu/integral or subscribe via iTunes, SoundCloud, Stitcher, or PodBean.

Sources:

- Contributions by Erin Kimura-Walsh, Alma Orozco, and Lorenzo Gamboa
- First in My Family: Supporting First-Generation College Students, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eAvitIDqB3w>