**The Power of Your Story Can Change A First Generation Student's Life**

00:00:00 **Victor**

you start having conversations with people, you realize, "Hey, you went through the same struggles. You may have come from a different part of town, but you messed up as much as I did." And that ultimately, that's the message we want students to hear: "Hey, ask me about it so you don't have to make the same mistake I did. Yes, I might not look like you and I may not be from the same part of town, but at some point, we went through the same struggles."

00:00:29 **Christina**

Hi, I'm Christina Barsi.

00:00:30 **Sun**

And I'm Sun Ezzell, and you're listening to the Magic Mountie Podcast.

00:00:33 **Christina**

Our mission is to find ways to keep your ear to the ground, so to speak - by bringing to you the activities and events you may not have time to attend, the resources on campus you might want to know more about, the interesting things your colleagues are creating, and the many ways we can continue to better help and guide our students.

00:00:50 **Sun**

We bring to you the voices of Mt. SAC, from the classroom to completion.

00:00:55 **Speaker 1**

And I know I'm going to achieve my goals, and I know people here are going to help me to do it.

00:01:02 **Speaker 2**

She is a sociology major and she's transferring to Cal Poly, Pamona! Psychology major, English major ...

00:01:07 **Sun**

From transforming part-time into full-time-

00:01:09 **Speaker 1**

I really liked the time that we spent with Julie about how to write a CV and a cover letter.

00:01:15 **Christina**

Or just finding time to soak in the campus.

00:01:17 **Speaker 1**

To think of the natural environment around us as a library.

00:01:21 **Christina**

We want to keep you informed and connected to all things Mt. SAC. But most importantly, we want to keep you connected with each other. I'm Christina Barsi, Mt. SAC alumni, and producer of this podcast.

00:01:32 **Sun**

And I'm Sun Ezzell, Learning Assistance Faculty and Professional Learning Academy Coordinator.

00:01:36 **Christina**

And this is the Magic Mountie Podcast.

00:01:43 **Christina**

How do we create language around discovering our first generation population at Mt. SAC, as well as a consistent definition of what it means to be a first gen college student?

00:01:54 **Christina**

Well, Yadira Perez, Program Specialist for the ACES program and Victor Rojas who oversees the TRiO programs has created an initiative to try to answer those questions. And if there's one thing you take away from this episode, it's to know that your story has power. And by sharing it, you might be providing the motivation that a student needs to keep going.

00:02:14 **Sun**

Alright, well, Victor and Yadira, thank you so much for joining me today on the Magic Mountie Podcast to talk about the work that you're doing to support first generation students at Mt. SAC.

00:02:28 **Yadira**

Thank you for having us.

00:02:30 **Victor**

Thank you, my pleasure for being here, for having us.

00:02:33 **Sun**

I was wondering if you could maybe introduce yourselves, tell us a little bit about yourselves and the work that you're doing.

00:02:40 **Victor**

Again, my name is Victor Rojas. I oversee our TRiO programs here on campus, which include our Student Support Services grant and Upward Bound grant, along with overseeing our newly formed Rising Scholars Program, which serves formerly incarcerated, our system-impacted students on campus.

00:03:00 **Yadira**

And I am Yadira, I am the Program Specialist for the ACES program here at Mt. SAC. And so, we serve students that are first generation, low-income and/or have a disability. And so, that's what the program that I currently work for.

00:03:09 **Sun**

Wonderful, thank you so much. So, I was wondering if you could share a little bit about the work that you're doing to support first generation students at Mt. SAC.

00:03:19 **Victor**

Certainly, I'll take a stab at this and then Yadira can fill in the gaps. So, this work is something that is happening at a national level. It's an initiative that was started a few years ago by the Council of Opportunity in education, which is our lobbying organization for TRiO at the national level.

00:03:42 **Victor**

They started this work because they found that a lot of students that we serve and a lot of students that we are mandated to serve are actually (I should rephrase that) - that we are mandated to serve through our TRiO grants, whether it's Upward Bound, or SSS, or McNair need to be first generation and/or low-income, and/or disabled.

00:04:03 **Victor**

Each grant, depending on which one you have has a different requirement. The problem being is that up to about three years ago, there was never really a national cohesive effort to support this student population. Our students can identify in so many different ways, but this being one that has gone back for years. At some point, everyone's family was first gen, someone was first gen in your family up to present day.

00:04:34 **Victor**

We have tons of students, over 50% here in our campus, over 50% in our campus that are first gen. So, it affects us one way or another. Whether it was years ago, generations ago, or whether you're the current first generation student in your family.

00:04:48 **Victor**

So, when Yadira and I came aboard, we came aboard about three years ago, roughly around the same time - we took it upon ourselves to bring this to Mt. SAC; saying, hey, we're a prominent college in our region, in Southern California. We serve a wide range of areas in Southern California and our students come all the way from Palm Springs and some of them come from the Westside, and they're very diverse. This is a way to capture all of them, regardless of your gender, their age, their race, ethnicity - it's a catchall for everyone.

00:05:30 **Victor**

So, we should be celebrating it. So, we put together a committee and this year's ... I guess I'll preface by saying last year's committee was very different than this year's. So, obviously, due to the pandemic, we couldn't have an as extravagant celebration as we did last year, but we thought that we should still continue this work.

00:05:54 **Yadira**

Yes, and so last year, I think it was a really great way to start off our first generation celebration. To kind of talk a little bit about what we did last year - we were able to do one week full of events and incorporating faculty, administrators, students.

00:06:11 **Yadira**

We had one day where we had an open house where we had posters of faculty, administrators, and employees of Mt. SAC, where students were able to go into that space and really acknowledge and realize how many of our employees and faculty are first generation. And sometimes even within faculty and staff at Mt. SAC, where I didn't even know you were first gen. And so, kind of creating that exposure.

00:06:34 **Yadira**

We had a second day where we were able to have a brunch where students were able to have conversations with our first generation employees and really get the understanding of what emotions did they go through, what experiences did they go through; and really provide our students with advice of how to overcome this challenge of navigating the higher education system.

00:07:00 **Yadira**

One of the trips that was really interesting and fun for me too, was taking our students out to USC and really experiencing what it's like to be at a four-year university, having them envision themselves and really say, "Hey, I'm capable of applying to a four-year university like USC, like UCLA," really any type of four-year university that the student wishes to go to, and learning about the programs that they offer.

00:07:28 **Yadira**

A lot of the students that participated in this trip to USC, a lot of them were part of our support programs like Bridge, ACES, a lot are from the Equity Center. And so, it was a great opportunity for them, again, to get that full-on exposure that the Transfer Center already provides for them.

00:07:44 **Yadira**

But it's just that incorporation of that first generation mindset and bringing that in and having alumni from USC that came to Mt. SAC speak to our students, that was a really amazing experience for our students and give us great feedback on that.

00:07:58 **Yadira**

So, I think overall, the focus of really making the students feel comfortable to say, "Hey, this person or this individual gave me advice. And so, I'm going to utilize those office hours."And so, those are some of the things that we wanted to really highlight the whole week of our first gen celebration.

00:08:14 **Yadira**

Obviously, this year, Victor had mentioned, we weren't able to really provide those really interactive pieces, but I think the informative piece of letting people know we have this first generation initiative going on and we want to continue to celebrate every year.

00:08:33 **Sun**

That sounds really amazing. Thank you so much for sharing. I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit more about first generation students at Mt. SAC, how many first gen students do we have, maybe what are some common experiences that they come to campus with?

00:08:48 **Victor**

Okay. I think first generation college students bring substantial strengths to our community. And by community, I mean Mt. SAC as a whole. Things like resiliency, ambition, a track record of beating the odds, a fresh viewpoint that enhances kind of the broader academic community. I think a lot of times, we don't recognize those assets that our students bring to our doorstep. We think of ourselves as the educators and they have nothing to offer.

00:09:26 **Victor**

A lot of us still operate on that banking form of education, where we're just kind of, "Here's information, here's information, here's information, take it - okay, now regurgitate it back to me." And not taking into mind that a lot of these students of ours have gone through tremendous things but have overcome, they're super resilient. And that brings tremendous wealth to our campus.

00:09:49 **Victor**

That said, we've also learned a lot of things, and I guess I bring that up because there are lessons learned as a campus that we have to learn from. One being is that (and this is why this year, it was all about awareness) - was that collectively, you asked about what our first generation students look like on campus?

00:10:12 **Victor**

Well, that's kind of hard to say, Sun, because institutionally, we don't have a checkbox that says, "Are you first gen?" That question does appear on the community college application, but there's no language that goes along with that question. So, Yadira's interpretation can be different than my interpretation, and it can be different from your interpretation.

00:10:35 **Victor**

So, as Yadira and I did the legwork for this, we would go around and just ask faculty members, people who we thought should know the answer to this question: "Hey Sun, are you first gen?"

00:10:51 **Victor**

And we got a lot of, "Oh yeah, I'm first gen." And then I'm like, "Well, how do you know you're first gen?" "Oh, because my parents didn't go to college."

00:10:59 **Victor**

Okay, right. So, then we'd ask your colleague, "Are you a first gen?" And they'd be like, "Oh no, no, no, my older sister went to college." And I'm like, "Wait, it doesn't matter whether your siblings, what matters is whether your parents went. And on top of that, if your parents didn't graduate, technically, according to the department of education definition, you are first gen."

00:11:23 **Victor**

So, there's still a lot of education on it as a campus that we need to do. So, we need to establish a definition that's consistent across campus. Because Yadira alluded to it in the question prior, was that regardless of where you come from, you'd be amazed at who's first gen and who's not.

00:11:45 **Victor**

A lot of times we make assumptions of individuals. It's like, "Oh man, he looks highly educated or whatnot. He's not first gen or his family, his parents must have gone to college too." And it's like, "No, I'm first gen ." And when you start having conversations with people, you realize, "Hey, you went through the same struggles, you may have come from a different part of town, but you messed up as much as I did."

00:12:08 **Victor**

And then ultimately, that's the message we want students to hear. We want students to hear like, "Hey, ask me about it, so you don't have to make the same mistake I did. Yes, I might not look like you and I may not be from the same part of town, but at some point, we went through the same struggles."

00:12:27 **Yadira**

I do want to add that I feel like a lot of our first gen students sometimes feel how Victor said, in terms of communicating with other people and finding out that they're first gen - sometimes they do feel like intimidated to say, "Hey, I'm going to ask this person a question, but I don't want to feel out of place. Or is this like an obvious answer, but I just don't know it."

00:12:48 **Yadira**

So, I think that at least from the last year when we were doing this celebration, the students were able to read a lot of our employee's first gen stories. You were hearing a lot of students around like, "Oh, this person shared this advice or went to this campus or did this" or whatever it is the student read, I feel like they did like feel more comfortable with that.

00:13:15 **Yadira**

Another thing too, is I feel like a lot of students don't necessarily know all the resources that are available to them on campus. Sometimes what happens is they come to school and they go back home because they have different responsibilities.

00:13:31 **Yadira**

So, what we did last year to really not only target our students that are within the equity programs that might already know more information about what it is to be first generation. So, I think a lot of the equity programs do a great job of promoting that and really explaining that to students.

00:13:46 **Yadira**

But those students that don't know about the resources or don't have the opportunity to be part of a program ... I will do classroom presentations and talk about ACES, but I also kind of incorporated in there, "Hey, there's like a first gen week and this is what first gen means." And a lot of students were intrigued and wanting to participate in that.

00:14:05 **Yadira**

So, I think just that conversation to make them feel less intimidated is really important for our first gen students to say, "Hey I'm not the only one," like Victor said, "I'm not the only one that has gone through this or the only one that's struggling and failing their class."

00:14:20 **Yadira**

Even for me, when I talk to my students, I say, "Hey, I'm a Mt. SAC, alumni student and I failed statistics twice, but I persisted and you can too ." And so, explaining that to them and making them realize that just because they see a person in a certain position doesn't mean that they didn't struggle as a first gen student. We have to learn our mistakes, navigate that, and that's why we're back here as professionals to then help them out with that situation and help them make less mistakes as Victor mentioned.

00:14:53 **Victor**

So, I guess just the last tidbit I'll add, is that a lot of times our students on campus don't always see themselves in terms of first gen. It's not an identity that's salient to them, but I think overall it's them finding a home and this is just another home for them to possibly find their comfort, their solitude in and be able to identify with a group that's going to help them be persistent and resilient and obtain their degree.

00:15:26 **Yadira**

Yeah, and then also another thing that I want to add too, is I feel like a lot of our students at Mt. SAC don't necessarily sometimes see themselves at certain types of universities as first gen students. They think that a certain school was out of their league and that they're not capable of that because of whatever reasons. It could be that they have that imposter syndrome where they feel like, "Oh, that's not my place."

00:15:49 **Yadira**

So, I think that that was the goal that we wanted to highlight last year, was let me expose you to a top-tier school like USC. And another one we were thinking about was UCLA. And so, at Mt. SAC, if we look at the stats of where our students go to, they go to a lot of the Cal State system, which is perfectly fine.

00:16:06 **Yadira**

But we also want to expose them to know and feel that they are capable of applying to a UC campus, or to a private university, and that they will be successful. And they will be successful because Mt. SAC will prepare them to know what resources they can reach out to, use all those skills that Mt. SAC is teaching them to be resilient students, to transfer their skills, and be a successful student over there by doing research or by interning or whatever it is. And again, exposing them to all of these ideas that they can say, "Wow, I didn't even know this was possible at this type of university."

00:16:44 **Yadira**

And so, that was one thing I did want to highlight that as a first gen, don't limit yourself, apply to all the ones that you can, and then let the campus decide for you where to go to, challenge our students and say, hey, a lot of our first gen students are low-income. And so, they think like, "Hey can I apply to this campus and say there's financial aid, there's this."

00:17:06 **Yadira**

So, a lot more resources that comes with that and really exposing them to the full picture of the resources that they have.

00:17:13 **Sun**

It's making me think about how much courage it takes to come to college and to put yourself out there and also about the power of our stories. It might just take one person saying, "Hey, I've been where you are. This is what it was like for me."

00:17:29 **Sun**

What are some things that you wish that faculty or classified staff or managers maybe would know about the experiences of first gen students in terms of offering support or connecting students with resources?

00:17:46 **Yadira**

One thing that I would want is ... and I say this as a student perspective, back when I was a student at Mt. SAC and continuously going through my education, and then also hearing our students and what they continuously repeat to us when I ask them questions about, "Hey, did you know about this?" if a student wasn't a participant of any program.

00:18:06 **Yadira**

So, I think one thing that I would like is for a lot of faculty and just everyone on campus, to be really aware of what programs we have on campus. And then really have like a day to say, "Hey, let me have a conversation to these students about tutoring services, about what support programs we have on campus." Because a lot of our students, again, they go to class and they go home or they go to their responsibilities to a job.

00:18:32 **Yadira**

So, when we're all playing our part, which a lot of faculty and staff are already doing, but just to make that bigger movement of really designating like times in a day where the transfer center will go into to these programs or these classes and talk about the program and the resources that we have.

00:18:51 **Yadira**

So, that way, students can become more familiar with it and feel comfortable to say, "Hey, I saw a face from ACES." Or, "I saw a face from Bridge, the Transfer Center. Now, I feel comfortable to go back and say, 'Oh, let me go talk to Yadira or let me go talk to whoever it is that is from that program'" and create that relationship with students.

00:19:11 **Yadira**

And even if we're not able to go into the classroom for whatever reasons, for the faculty to really use the time to explain these resources to them, especially because the majority of our students are obviously with faculty, they're with their professors. So, that's like the perfect way to really promote all of this. And that way, students can really get the best knowledge that they can about what we can offer and what we can do for them.

00:19:36 **Victor**

Sun, I think for me, what I would want our faculty to know is that they are the resource. I think this year, that's why we produced the virtual background that said, "I am first gen, ask me about my story." Because we don't know as educators what a student is going to gravitate to. We don't know what's going to register for them, we don't know what's going to inspire them.

00:20:01 **Victor**

So, if you see an ally that is putting themselves out there by putting, for example, this virtual background, as they're lecturing or as they're holding office hours, and the student let's say does have the courage to ask them, so, "Hey, I see you're first gen, what does that mean? Or what was your story or what helped you?"

00:20:19 **Victor**

If nothing else, it sparks a conversation. Something that I know sometimes our students, our first gen students fear because they don't know the concepts of office hours. They don't know the concept of the fact that faculty are there to teach and they love it, and they welcome office hours and they welcome questions, and they like the interaction with students.

00:20:41 **Victor**

So, for us, this year, it was about again, awareness. And a lot of that goes back to the faculty saying, "This is my story. I hope it resonates with you, I hope it inspires you. Please don't make the same mistakes." Or, "Hey, you know what, the Tutoring Center really helped me" Or, "You know what, the REACH or we have an Equity Center on campus. Maybe you should go talk to them or the Pride Center," or whatever the case may be.

00:21:08 **Victor**

I think our faculty have more power in their stories than they realize. I would encourage them to share those very powerful narratives.

00:21:19 **Sun**

Thank you. And you said Yadira that you are a Mt. SAC alum, and I was wondering is there a teacher who shared their story with you or with a class that you remember, or that resonated with you?

00:21:36 **Yadira**

I think for me, I was part of the Bridge Program. And so the counselor that I had was Annabel. And I think that her story really resonated with me in terms of having immigrant parents and her being Hispanic. And for me, in my family, I didn't really see a lot of people that are a woman in our family, like went into higher education. I was the first one.

00:21:59 **Yadira**

So, to see her empowered me to say, "Hey, it's possible for me as a Latina to go into higher education, get my degree - if she could do it, I could do it." And so, her story was really impactful for me. And also, I had my older brother that went to Mt. SAC and also graduated. He transferred out to UC San Diego and got his degree and now he's an investigator.

00:22:22 **Yadira**

Now, my younger brother also went to Mt. SAC, graduated, went to UCLA, graduated, and now, is pursuing his master's at Long Beach. I always tell everyone we're a hundred percent success rate with Mt. SAC, with the Bridge Program. I just think that Mt. SAC and Bridge for us specifically at those times, really helped us make those goals happen for us and really made us feel that we were able to do it.

00:22:47 **Yadira**

And it's amazing just to see that again, in my family, we have a hundred percent success rate. And so, I share that with my students and say, "Hey, like we were raised in a single parent household and we did it." And so, I try to share a lot of what has been my journey to motivate others.

00:23:03 **Sun**

Thank you so much for sharing that. I feel like you and your brothers should get free Mt. SAC t-shirts or something like that. Like I wonder how many families there are where all the sibs have gone to the same college. It's such a cool shared experience.

00:23:17 **Yadira**

Yes, yes, definitely.

00:23:19 **Sun**

And how about you, Victor? When you were in college, did you have a teacher who shared their story?

00:23:26 **Victor**

I did. And interestingly enough, it was someone that I didn't expect it to come from. Being a Latino male from the West Coast, from East LA, and having gone to Boston University, I got support from an older white Jewish male, who our only common bond, Sun, was the fact that he was first generation too. That he also had immigrant parents and I will forever be grateful to Dr. Wasserman for believing in me and sharing his persistence story, and the fact that he struggled.

00:24:02 **Victor**

And I'm like, "Wait, but you're white." And that's what I would tell him, " You're white, it was easy for you, right?" And he was like, "Wait, wait, wait. No, it was also very hard for me." And then we had that conversation and at the time as an undergrad, not knowing what first gen meant, and I don't think at that time we used the term "first gen," we just knew we were both the first in our families to go to college.

00:24:29 **Victor**

He would tell me, "Victor, you're going to graduate. I don't care how many times you have to take organic chemistry, you're going to graduate. And I'm not any smarter than you are and you're going to do this." And the faith he had in me and those stories again, that he shared - that helped me persist.

00:24:48 **Sun**

Thank you for sharing those stories with us today as well. Are there other things you'd like to share about the Mt. SAC first gen initiative or resources you'd like folks to know about?

00:25:00 **Yadira**

As a first generation student, you are going to face a lot of challenges, you are going to face a lot of doubts within yourself. And I think that even sometimes continues with your career. As a first gen, everything is new to you because you don't have that person to rely on to say, "Hey, give me this advice of now it's time to interview, now it's time to do this, and now it's time to look for a job" and really get that insightful advice for a student - "Choose this campus over this campus because of whatever major you're going into."

00:25:32 **Yadira**

So, I think that for me, is wanting to have students understand that it's okay to feel how you feel, it's okay to not know everything. Also, because you do not know everything, reach out. Don't be afraid of having conversations with your counselors, with your professors, with staff, people from support programs and asking them, "Hey, how do I do this?" To really then share with other friends how to navigate that system.

00:26:03 **Yadira**

Because if you go back to research, it shows that your peers around you are the ones that are really going to motivate you and be able to help you continue sometimes in your education. And so, if one student knows one resource - we've had a lot of ACES students where they go into leadership positions within campus, in clubs, where then they start to draw out more students and have them participate.

00:26:27 **Yadira**

Get out of your comfort zone. It's hard, it's easier said than done, but really get out of your comfort zone and reach out for help when you need to.

00:26:36 **Victor**

My message to students is to find that mentor. For me, working during the day, during my undergrad and going to classes at night, it was a janitor who kept me going. The janitor sometimes was the biggest educator on my campus.

00:26:49 **Victor**

It was like they would say, "Mijo, good job." In their broken English, they were very supportive of me. And it's sometimes what I needed. It's like, "Oh men, I shouldn't be thinking about ditching class tonight. I should go into that room and listen to this lecture." And so, you never know where you find inspiration from, but find that inspiration on your campus.

00:27:13 **Yadira**

And a great way to really find that mentor is ... we're actually finalizing our first gen website. We are currently revamping it and we're finalizing and we're actually having a component in the website where you're going to be able to see all our first gen stories from our faculty, administrators, and stuff from last year.

00:27:33 **Yadira**

We had posters, so now we wanted to have them onto the website. We have a student toolkit on our website as well, where students can go on there and navigate what resources are on campus. And we also have it for employees, staff, and administrators here on campus too.

00:27:48 **Yadira**

Also, we have a different kit for them, and specifically for faculty where, you know, how do we break this down for our students and what can I do as a professional to really encourage our students to build this community within our campus.

00:28:03 **Sun**

That sounds wonderful. Thank you both so much for taking the time to talk with me today for the podcast.

00:28:11 **Victor**

Yes, thank you. Thank you. And again, thank you for having us.

00:28:13 **Yadira**

Yes, thank you for having us.

00:28:15 **Christina**

Thank you for listening to the Magic Mountie Podcast. Remember to subscribe on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you like to get your podcasts, so you can listen in the car, in your office, or however you like to listen.

00:28:31 **Christina**

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