Dean’s Column

Mardi Gras. Legislative Special Session. Valentine’s Day. Ash Wednesday. Writing a column is one way to see connections among seemingly disparate elements, whether the connection is made through narrative, causality (however spurious), or some convoluted understanding of Fibonacci series, but the linking of these seemed uncanny. Campus events, state issues, and national affairs develop a weird resonance as I think about the antic upheaval that is carnival, or the Feast of Fools, and its closure in the somber reflection that is Lent in Christian tradition. The legislature goes into special session to reflect and plan; the lovers gaze into one another’s eyes and pledge monogamous troth; the believer fasts and prepares herself for change.

And what of the graduate student during this season of austerity (even if its bacchanalian prequel was relatively sedate)? In last week’s webinar for the Council of Graduate Schools’ Advocacy Ambassador Network: “Involving Graduate Students in Advocacy,” the speakers suggested some ways in which graduate students and faculty can serve as witnesses to higher education and a better future. Arguing that every legislator should know about the effect graduate programs have upon the well-being and economy of the state, one presenter insisted that graduate students should be the representatives of higher education because graduate students are simply “more charming and endearing than faculty.” No participant denied this self-evident truth, but all agreed that even the non-charming had a role in preparing for the advent of higher education.

For those of you wanting to give nonsectarian alms, consider support for the Higher Education Act. You can find out more at “Renewing the Higher Education Act: Resources for Students and Institutions” at http://www.acenet.edu/Pages/Renewing-the-Higher-Education-Act.aspx
For those of you yearning for more activism, check out Student Advocates for Graduate Education at http://www.sagecoalition.net/.

And for those of you looking for something closer to home, come join us at First Gen and Friends (2/23, 3:30 - 5:00, Coates 218), at March’s Professional Development Workshops, and at President Alexander’s “Challenge Accepted” presentation (2/16, 10:30 - 11:30, Student Union Theater). I look forward to seeing you there.

Cordially,

Michelle A. Massé
Important Dates

February

- 23rd - First Gen and Friends, 3:30 - 5:00 p.m. at 218 Coates Hall
- 28th - Associate Professors' Network, 3:30 - 5:00 p.m. at 123 David Boyd Hall

For more important dates and deadlines, please view the Graduate Calendar for Spring 2018.
On January 26, over thirty first-generation graduate students came together in a remarkable gathering, co-facilitated by Rachel Aker (Ph.D. student, Theatre), and Erica Stewart (M.Ed. student, Curriculum and Instruction), and me. Articulate, open, and passionate about paving a path for those who would follow their trailblazing selves, they helped to shape last semester’s discussions into this semester’s realities. Others of you have sent comments, submitted creative logos for “Grad Gen 1,” and made suggestions about what you’d like to see happen. The LSU graduate community has come together, whether senior administrators or first-year graduate students, whether first-generation or tenth, to pledge support for first-generation students.

There’s a lot I can say about first-generation students as someone who’s first-generation high school on one side and first-generation college on the other. Much of what I’ve learned has only been in hindsight, however, as I listen to the voices of my students and experience that Eureka! or “click!” moment where suddenly experience is shaped through knowledge to become recognition. Asked to provide words that characterize how they feel, which we’ve included as a word cloud here, participants poured forth a rich cacophony of ambivalence: “accomplished,” “determined,” and “ambitious” jostled with “scared,” “stressed,” and “lonely.”

I can say a lot, as befits an English professor, but what students have to say in this context (and many others) is more powerful, more on the mark, and more influential. I can’t include all of the comments I received, or each comment in its entirety, but I think that you’ll be as impressed as I am. And, when you’ve read and taken to heart these compelling insights, please also note the call at the bottom for the rest of our meetings this semester.

Being a first-generation graduate student is like having an old school map and compass versus a GPS. With a GPS you can enter the destination and get an estimated time of arrival. It will tell you if tolls are expected. You are automatically rerouted if roads are closed and if there are heavy delays. While all first-generation college students are not the same, it is likely to take those students longer to find their way. If there are delays they have to pull over, get out their map, and figure out the next-best route. It will be more time consuming. If there are tolls and they aren’t prepared they will be escorted off the road and again sit on the side of the road alone trying to figure out how they will get to their destination. It’s not impossible. It’s just more difficult. - Portia Henderson is a second-year Ph.D. student in Social Work

We often think about tangible things being passed down, but the intangible matters too. Many parents of first-generation graduate students . . . do not have access to that experience, and this experience along with its general “know-how” is vital to surviving the graduate school terrain. - Anonymous

When I think about why it’s important for LSU to pay attention to first-gen status, what comes to mind is creating an environment of active conversations about the needs of first-gen students as they differ from the needs of their peers in order to provide the resources that first-gens need to open the doors for others in their home communities. First-gen students are often not only the first in their families to graduate from college, but also the first in their immediate communities and circles of peers. Giving first-gen students the confidence to navigate both their personal and academic environments is integral in drawing in an increasingly diverse student body. - Aubry Kyle is a third-year Ph.D. student in the Department of Geography and Anthropology.

I think Gen 1 students have much energy and ambition (raw talent) at the beginning of their studies, but may lose these qualities in the long run due to their lack of experience/information about how to manage and navigate graduate studies. So, when LSU provides more attention and support to them, they will keep going with a positive spirit, accomplish more, and support other students. Even after graduating, they will share a positive experience with the community about graduate school and LSU. They may be more interested and positive about sending their kids to graduate school in the future. - Ahmad Souri has just graduated from LSU with a Ph.D. in civil engineering.

I believe that LSU should pay attention to first-generation status because our roadmaps aren’t paved in advance. We learn by doing rather than hearing about others doing, and that’s simultaneously beautiful (because we make the path for those that follow us) and terrifying (because we also can make the mistakes). - Tierra Alexander is a third-year Ph.D. student in Social Work
Recognizing first generation students and actively supporting them shows a commitment to the actual success of the students. It also helps to make higher education more accessible, rather than being reserved for those who come from greater means. - Anonymous

Imagine what it was like attending university for the first time. Was it scary? Were you excited? Were you nervous? Now imagine being the first person you’ve ever known to attend university. College is strange. It’s a new experience. But for a lot of students, it’s newer for them than others. Going to college without support and guidance is incredibly difficult, especially when you don’t know what to expect. LSU is a huge campus with an ever-expanding amount of opportunities, it can be overwhelming. . . . These students need a positive guiding force to help them continue their academic careers, enhance their campus experience, and support them on their path to their goals and future careers. - Jaime E. Johnston is a second-semester Ph.D. student in Comparative Literature

Too often we are not taught the basics of surviving college and graduate school. Many may receive the benefit of having family and friends’ guidance, but certainly not all. It is an unfair disadvantage to throw Gen 1 students into the mix and tell them to swim when they were never taught. Though the tough and intelligent crowd of first gens can certainly learn on their own, they should not have to entirely. - Rachel M Correll is a second-year Ph.D. student in Environmental Science

LSU should pay a great deal of attention to the first-generation student population because they are facing challenges not only for personal satisfaction, but to set standards, achieve milestones, and break barriers for their families and communities. First-generation status is just as important on the graduate school level as it is on the undergraduate level because “figuring it out alone” does not necessarily stop after obtaining a bachelor’s degree. - Austin Dixon is a first-year student in the Higher Education Administration Master’s program.

I know that you’ve been as moved and motivated as I in reading these words.

So please save the date for First Gen and Friends:

Friday, February 23, 3:30 - 5:00 (Coates 218)
Thursday, March 22, 3:00 - 4:30 (Peabody 225)
Friday, April 13, 3:30 - 5:00 (Peabody 225)

Children are welcome.

Bring your own insights, and help us to decide upon how we want to alternate kinds of activities ranging from an Insider's Guide to LSU, through networking, or a potluck (for which food are you most homesick?).
Elizabeth Hilliard - First Place

Elizabeth Hilliard is a third-year master’s student in the Department of Physics. In her award-winning presentation, “Verification of a Novel Intensity Modulation Device for Electron Radiotherapy,” Hilliard discussed ways to improve electron radiotherapy for cancer treatment. More specifically, her master’s thesis focuses on validating a device that better controls the intensity of radiation at a given depth in the body. She states that controlling the intensity gives specialists the ability to irradiate the tumor as evenly as possible without irradiating surrounding healthy body tissue.

“Participating in the Three Minute Thesis Competition was an excellent opportunity because it allowed me to learn about other LSU students’ research, and challenged me to present the complexities of my research in a way that is both informative and digestible for an audience outside of my field,” said Hilliard.

She will receive $1,000 research travel award and will soon compete in the 3MT® Southern Regional Competition in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

Hilliard is an active member of University United Methodist Church, and plays drums for Bloco Jacaré - a community samba band. The Syracuse, New York, native is passionate about making music, advocating for social justice, and making intentional relationships through small group activities or studies.
Zheng Jia - Second Place

Zheng Jia is a fifth-year doctoral student in the Department of Mechanical Engineering. His research, “Do It Yourself: DNA Sequencing by Coin-size Device,” focuses on the development of nanofluidic devices for biomolecule detection. He wants to fabricate affordable and efficient DNA sequencing platforms on polymer materials.

“The competition is really challenging but helpful,” Jia said. “Making the audience understand a new field in a limited amount of time requires clear and deep thinking of my own work. Every researcher should try this if they have a chance.”

When he’s not developing his research, he enjoys reading, Internet surfing, cooking, and traveling. Jia is from Changchun, China.

Austin Thompson - People’s Choice

Austin Thompson is a second-year master’s student in the Speech-Language Pathology program at the Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders. As an aspiring speech scientist, he is interested in investigating the speech characteristics of speakers with various neurological conditions, like Parkinson’s Disease. In his research, “Parkinson’s Disease: An Investigation of Speech Movement,” Thompson explains how changes in speech present as the first signs of disease onset. His thesis specifically focuses on how Parkinson’s disease affects the movement of speech production.

“Participating in the Three Minute Thesis Competition was incredibly challenging but equally exhilarating,” said Thompson. “The most challenging aspect was condensing my entire thesis into a three-minute speech. Luckily, I had the tremendous support of my peers and mentors in the Communication Sciences and Disorders department.”

Thompson, a native of Mandeville, Louisiana, enjoys reading science fiction novels, watching movies, and eating good food. He also enjoys playing with his furry, four-legged son, Rookie. After graduating from the master’s program in May, Thompson will continue his work as a doctoral student with a focus on speech science.