

Episode 107: First Gen Week honors the University's first generation college students

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Stella Mehlhoff spoke with first-generation college students who shared their journey to higher education.



by Stella Mehlhoff

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INTRO MUSIC

STELLA MEHLHOFF: Hey, this is Stella Mehlhoff and you're listening to In the Know, a podcast by the Minnesota Daily. Each episode, we dive into a new part of the University of Minnesota's students and communities.

According to the University of Minnesota's first-generation website, it was first-gen week on campus from November 4th to the 11th. For anyone who doesn't know, a first-gen student is someone who is the first in their family to go to college or to earn an undergraduate degree. During this time, the university celebrated first-gen identities by hosting social hours, receptions, and webinars. The website states that roughly 1 in 4 students at the U are first-gen.

I sit down with Hannah Methner, a first-gen student, to hear about her experience. Methner graduated from the U last spring. She majored in Biology, Society, and the Environment and minored in public health. Her education story starts with her great grandpa.

HANNAH METHNER: Every time we would like visit him, he'd you know, would just be like "if you want to be successful, like you should go to school and you should really like invest in yourself because when you invest in yourself, you kind of just like invest in the world around you."

And so it always kind of felt like for me it was like something that, not only like, I think a lot of people feel like they have to go to college, but it's like I wanted to go to college to like honor him.

I felt like I had more to prove, like, especially being like a pre-health student, I didn't have the connections that a lot of my classmates had. I have no one in my family that's a doctor, a nurse, like anything like that.

What my experience was like being first gen is, at first it was really hard because I didn't ask for help when I knew that I needed it.

MEHLHOFF: Methner says she hit a turning point when she reached out to one of her professors.

METHNER: One day I was brave. I was like, "hey, like I feel like you can help and like whatever." And he's like, "okay, so here's what we're going to do." He ended up being first gen and he's like, "you're gonna go to your advisor. You're gonna talk about your major. there's this really cool summer program that you should sign up for. I wanna help you and like, invest in you."

MEHLHOFF: After that, Methner says she began to use more resources on campus. She tells me she felt supported by the CLA Career Center, the Student Academic Success center, and a first-gen workshop series in the Pre-Health Student Resource Center.

To get another perspective on first-gen students, I also talk with Professor Rashné Jehangir. She started the First Generation Institute here at the U. According to their website, the Institute combines scholarship and practice to build support systems for first-gen students. Jehangir explains why these spaces are so important.

RASHNÉ JEHANGIR: When you come into a space, any space, you know, a birthday party at Kindergarten, and you feel like you're welcomed, you're valued, and you matter, and what you bring with you is important, you're more likely to wanna stay.

You're going to feel more like you're part and parcel of this complex tapestry that is higher education, as opposed to feeling you're on the periphery of something looking in.

MEHLHOFF: Jehangir explains that first-gen students are often talked about in terms of the opportunities and resources they lack. According to the book "Education and Society," Dr Lisa Nunn explains that first generation students are more likely to have lower high school GPAs and less likely to attend schools that can prep them for college. This can make the transition difficult. Instead, Jehangir encourages us to ask:

JEHANGIR: What are the things that students bring? What are their strengths? What are the ways in which they have navigated complex systems before that weren't designed for them?

METHNER: I think first generation students, um, bring like a humble confidence like to the classroom and then also like in their fields because it's like they know, like they've done the work to get to where they are. I mean, every first gen student that I've met is like really proud of like, you know, that piece of them.

MEHLHOFF: After navigating the ups and down of college, Methner paid it forward. She became a peer mentor and a TA.

METHNER: I was surprised by the fact that when I left, I felt like I didn't want to leave. I loved it so much and like, my attitude towards like education and like, feeling fulfilled, like towards the end, like I felt so fulfilled and like so proud and like, so happy.

MEHLHOFF: And when she was the first in her family to walk across the stage on graduation day...

METHNER: They were so, they were so excited. I think I was especially excited for my grandpa to come and just like, see me like all dressed up like in my cap and gown. And I know like my parents have, and my sister, have always been like really fierce supporters of

me and like know what it took to like get to walking across the stage. They were really excited and like cheered my name and we like celebrated after. It just like, I think it meant a lot to be able for them to be there.

MEHLHOFF: Methner's journey doesn't end there. Now, she's working at a dental office in her hometown and also for a non-profit dental clinic.

METHNER: I'm actually currently waiting to hear back from dental school. I applied. I just took my big test. So fingers crossed, in the future I'll be doing something in that field.

MEHLHOFF: Before my conversation with Methner, I met a first-gen grad student at the U. Enet Mukurazita is an international student from Zimbabwe. She is getting her Phd in Comparative International Development Education.

ENET MUKURAZITA: As an African, in our culture there has not been much investment and still in a lot of families and communities, there's not much investment in girls' education because, um, of the belief that girls will get married off.

MEHLHOFF: Mukurazita knows this first hand. After finishing high school, Mukurazita went to Trinity Western University in British Columbia for her bachelor's degree. Before she could finish her degree, her dad stopped paying.

MUKURAZITA: I actually gave up and then my mom said "no, you're not giving up. You're gonna go back to school."

And I'm like, "mom, you don't even have a job, you're not rich like our dad, so how are you gonna pay?" But she knocked on every door. I think that did something in me, and I said, "I'm gonna go and I'm gonna get this education" because she said, "education will change your life." If I had been educated, my life would be different.

MEHLHOFF: Mukurazita earned her bachelor's in 1994. But she didn't stop there. By 2019, she earned two master's degrees. Now, Mukurazita dedicates her doctorate study to helping other women do the same.

MUKURAZITA: Having experienced that and just thinking that there are more women on the continent also facing this, who have had no opportunity to continue with their education, or no opportunity to even finish. I just, it just stuck with me, you know, to say, what can I do? Who can I help?

MEHLHOFF: In her doctorate study, Mukurazita works to provide women in Sub-Saharan Africa with entrepreneurial training. She also began another project, Alimah International.

MUKURAZITA: Alimah is an Arabic word, um, meaning educated female. I learned this word from a friend of mine, um, who speaks Arabic. I don't speak Arabic, but it meant so much to me that they actually have a word that says educated female.

MEHLHOFF: Alimah aims to encourage global collaboration between female grad students. But it's still in its early stages. Alimah International will connect students from Africa and the U.S. so they can support and learn from each other.

MEHLHOFF: Murkurazita doesn't stand alone. Jehangir endeavors to create more opportunities for first-gen students. She explains that institutions like the U need to do more to close the gaps between first-generation students and higher education.

JEHANGIR: From what I have heard in my research from students is it is a challenge to negotiate walking back and forth across this bridge, right? To negotiating your home world and your school world.

The institution needs to do a better job of welcoming and helping the family understand, um, the world of the university. And understanding that world has to be reciprocal. We can't just honor the bridge on one side.

MUKURAZITA: I have two daughters in college right now. Uh, my son is a senior. He [is] going to college.

I didn't set myself out to be a role model. I set myself out to get this education, to make a difference in other people's lives. But I believe that it has not only motivated my own children, but people in my clan and people in my community, people in my church.

MEHLHOFF: When I ask Mukurazita what's next for her, she doesn't hesitate.

MUKURAZITA: I am not sure physically where I will be in terms of still in North America or Africa, but whatever I do, I know I'm going to be working still for the betterment of women, whether they're African women or African diasporan women or American women. I, I dedicate my life to gender issues.

MEHLHOFF: You can read more stories like Methner's and Mukurazita's at firstgen.umn.edu/our-stories.

As always, thanks so much for listening. This episode was written by Stella Mehlhoff and produced by Abby Matchtig and Alberto Gomez. I hope you all are having a lovely fall semester and I encourage you to reach out to us with any questions, comments, or concerns by emailing podcast@mndaily.com.

I'm Stella Mehlhoff, and this is In the Know.

