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A Long Way



from Home

First-generation college students face obstacles but find their own ways to thrive

By Ruth Jacobs Photos by Fred Field

The odds that Victor Cabada '05 would graduate from high school—let alone college—were slim. A first-generation American of Mexican descent, Cabada was born and raised in South Central Los Angeles, or, as he calls it, “the ghetto.” Thrust into the foster care system at age 12, Cabada found his comfort zone—and distinguished himself—through school activities. He joined more clubs than he can remember at Manual Arts High School, where Spanish is the first language for most students and the surrounding area is impoverished and rife with gangs and violence. He took college-prep courses and watched as classmates dropped out of school, often to help provide for their struggling families. As he saw it, he had three choices after high school. He could go to work. He could join the army. Or he could go to college. “I didn’t want to go to the workforce. I’d probably suck in the army,” he said in his mild tone. So college it would be.

Though Cabada’s parents didn’t attend college, it was part of his consciousness at an early age. He remembers his mother, who worked in clothing factories and as a cook at a preschool, encouraging him to think about college. “She didn’t want us to end up like her,” he said. Later he heard similar messages from foster parents who worked in manual labor, “jobs that strained their bodies,” as Cabada put it. He didn’t know much about college, but he knew it was at the end of a path leading from the inner city.

Making it to Mayflower Hill put Cabada in a new minority. Most first-generation college students attend community colleges or public universities. But some make it to selective private colleges. According to *Equity and Excellence in American Higher Education* (University of Virginia Press, 2005), 5.5 percent of students at its sample of “elite” private



institutions are first generation. At Colby first-generation college students made up 5.4 percent of the incoming class in 2004, 10.8 percent in 2002, and somewhere in between for the last decade.

Though these elite first-generation college students do not seem to struggle as much as their peers nationwide, they bring distinct challenges with them. A study released in August by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported that first-generation students do not perform as well in college classes, have more difficulty choosing a major, and are less likely to graduate than students whose parents completed a bachelor’s degree. Students accepted at Colby have a high level of motivation and preparation, but compared to some of their Colby classmates, their preparation may not be as sophisticated. “They [classmates] would use words and I’d be like ‘Oh crap, what’d I get myself into?’” remembers Cabada. Some first-generation students also

have difficulty acclimating to a place where so many students come from high-performing secondary schools and socioeconomically advantaged families. But, often beginning with parents’ messages, students like Cabada recognize college as the key to a life with more choices.

The benefits of a college education are commonly understood. A college degree means more professional options and increased financial security. College graduates’ salaries exceeded those of high-school graduates by 61 percent in 2002, according to the U.S. Department of Education. But for Cabada, college was more about opportunity and independence.

Since he didn’t aspire to making a lot of money and knew he didn’t have a support system to fall back on, Cabada wanted to avoid taking out loans. “At some point I actually questioned whether college would be a good idea because I would have to pay back the loans,” he said.

◀ Victor Cabada '05 strolls through downtown Fort Kent, Maine, where works as a member of Americorps*VISTA.



◀ “School was my haven,” said Victor Cabada ’05 of his high school years. Now the Los Angeles native works with high school students as an Americorps*VISTA member in Fort Kent, Maine.

said. (Colby is not alone; first-generation students are rarely tracked by schools or by the government as distinct group, leading to incomplete data on their backgrounds and on the group historically.) “However,” Adams continued, “we are attempting to attract and recruit and enroll students of high academic ability who also have high financial need.”

While a college education offers benefits, colleges also benefit from the presence of these students. “I think we agree that [the high-ability, high-need] quadrant ... of the applicant pool or the prospective student body is not as well represented here as it should be. So it’s a dimension of the case for diversity,” Adams said.

First-generation college students bring a richness to the campus that may not always be visible but is crucial to a diverse student body. Said Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid Parker Beverage: “We’re trying to bring kids with different backgrounds, with different world experiences, with different

it to post-secondary schooling, 21 percent enroll in four-year institutions—and fewer attend selective private colleges. Add the fact that he is Latino and from a low-income background, and Cabada belonged to every group that, according to a 2004 study, made him more likely to lack “college knowledge,” including how to prepare for higher education, how to apply, and how to understand financial aid.

For a young man who has beaten long odds, Cabada is modest—perhaps even slightly unsure of himself. He does not see his story as remarkable. But one of his high school teachers has a different perspective. “I was always amazed, once I learned about his background, how motivated, how much perseverance he put in to make sure he didn’t fall into any trap,” said Alan Seigel, a teacher at Manual Arts High School. “It always seemed to me that he knew that there was something he could do in terms of college. He really actively pursued it.” But hard work alone

Colby’s aid package meant no loans—and this is exactly the direction in which the College hopes it can continue moving. “There’s a kind of a general institutional

“We’re trying to bring kids with different backgrounds . . . so that when they room together they learn new vocabulary, so to speak.”

Parker Beverage, DEAN OF ADMISSIONS AND FINANCIAL AID

sense of obligation by way of the notion of opportunity and access,” said President William D. Adams.

Making Colby accessible to qualified students, regardless of their finances, has become a major initiative in the next phase of Colby’s growth. The College is able to offer competitive aid packages to students in need but continues to strive to increase access for low-income students. “We’ve never focused on [first-generation college students] as a group that we either track separately or strategically are attempting to attract,” Adams

academic interests, with different religious backgrounds, so that when they room together they learn new vocabulary, so to speak. They learn about different cultures, about different challenges that families face.”

The challenges often mean first-generation students need exceptional perseverance to make it to a school like Colby. Because his parents had not attended college, Cabada had one strike against him. In 2002, 37 percent of students taking the SAT had parents whose highest degree was a high school diploma. Another study found that of those who make

does not make a Colby education accessible.

Many first-generation students, like Cabada, say the reason they were able to attend Colby arrived in their mailboxes: their financial aid packages. Other first-generation college students come to Colby from financially secure middle class families. Not all are minorities, and not all attended low-performing high schools. Many make dean’s list their first semester. What all these students seem to share, beyond intense motivation, is the desire to have choices in life—to be able to choose a profession they are passionate about and make



◀ *"I just kind of drive myself . . . It's up to me to push myself for whatever I want to achieve," said Ann Marchaland '07, left, seen here practicing the piano at Colby.*

▶ *"In New York City Chinatown, if you don't get out of it you will stay there forever. I don't want myself to feel trapped in Chinatown like my parents," said Yin Zhong (Angie) Li '08, right, seen here studying in her dorm room. She often works on math problems until the early hours of the morning.*

a living at it, to be able to choose to live somewhere other than where they grew up.

The details of how they got to Colby, what they experience on Mayflower Hill, and what they will do once they leave are as unique as each individual.

Ann Marchaland's parents both grew up in the rural area of New York where they raised their children. Mary Ann and Andrew Marchaland came from families of 10 and eight children respectively. Mary Ann Marchaland might have attended college had she felt the opportunity was open to her, but she did not. She went straight to work after high school. She moved about 45 minutes from home to settle in the community where Andrew Marchaland's father owned a dairy farm. The young couple bought a piece of land next to the farm and built a home where they raised Ann, 20, and her brother, Andrew, 21.

Silos and red barns dot the rolling hills and the edges of cornfields around the town of Easton, where there are more cows than people and from which many natives never venture far. Though Manhattan is less than a four-hour drive, Ann Marchaland's brother has only visited once—dressed in his farm clothes. He went along for the ride while a friend cashed a check, got a parking ticket, and returned home. Ann Marchaland '07, on the other hand, loves the city. She once sang in Carnegie Hall.



"I'm kind of the anomaly in my family," said the Colby junior, a flutist and an alto who has sung with the Colby College Chorale in Prague and is studying in Cork, Ireland, during the spring semester. Some of her 41 cousins have attended local colleges, but she's the first to go far and to a selective private school like Colby. Her brother works on the family farm, where 120 milking cows roam in the pasture daily and where he works long hours in the spring plowing, planting, and fertilizing over 60 acres of crop fields. The first male Marchaland of this generation, he is considering eventually taking over the farm from his uncle. Their father, who worked as the town's highway superintendent for 10 years, now works in a job without the politics, operating heavy machinery. Their mother has worked her way up in the medical devices manufacturing business. "It took me a long time to get where I am and I've always told the kids you get a lot further a lot more quickly if you go to college," she said.

Mary Ann Marchaland exudes pride and contentment as she describes how her daughter parlayed her self-motivation into academic and musical accomplishment, reminding herself that she's allowed to boast—she's the mother. The two Marchaland women, who share an interest in music, enjoy clothes shopping together, and who don't care for hanging out on the farm, spent a lot of time together during the high school years, much of it in the car. "My mom drove me wherever I needed to be," Marchaland said. "She was very supportive of whatever I wanted to do."

Mary Ann Marchaland also took an active role in navigating the college process. The duo began with a book of colleges and online research and got help from friends and from information sessions at the high school. Marchaland's mother told her to apply where she wanted, regardless of cost, but that didn't seem to sink in, at first. "I know that Colby was the last college she applied to, simply because it was so expensive," said Mary Ann

Marchaland. Ann Marchaland expected to attend a state university for financial reasons. "It was a shock to realize that I could afford [Colby]," she said.

But Assistant Professor of English Tilar Mazzeo, a first-generation college student, cautions against making assumptions about finances. "It's assumed that you grew up in dire poverty because you're a first-generation college student," she said. Mazzeo's parents owned a wood stove shop in coastal Maine. "It is still possible not to have a college degree and to have a very upper-middle-class lifestyle," she said.

Similarly, some people assume that a person's first-generation status means he or she come from a family of a lower social class, Mazzeo says. They expect that the first-generation student won't have an interest in literature or poetry, for example. The granddaughter of a lobsterman who loved Victorian poetry, Mazzeo is troubled by generalizations about economic and social



status, and finds that current Colby students feel the same. “I think the thing about being assumed to being impoverished—in talking to students at Colby, that’s the part that everyone resists,” she said.

Still, Marchaland’s assumption that a private college like Colby would be out of reach is common among first-generation college students. Matt Rubinoff, executive director of the non-profit Center for Student Opportunity, attributes this to “lack of information and adequate counseling reaching the first-generation student during their high school years,” said Rubinoff. “We’re working to dispel the idea that these [selective, private] colleges are only for the wealthy.”

Even if all students understood that significant financial aid is available, they must first have the adequate college-prep coursework and the insight to apply. “If they’ve found their way to Colby, they’re a step ahead,” said Rubinoff.

Getting to Colby may be a triumph, but

for many first-generation students it’s the precursor to another set of challenges. The rigorous academics can be daunting even for the most qualified students. For Yin Zhong (Angie) Li ’08, this means free time is limited and homework dominates until midnight almost every night—and sometimes until 4:30 or 5 a.m. An East Asian studies and math double major who is on the dean’s list, she wrestles with math problems for hours. “I can sit there for five hours and won’t be able to do even one of them,” she said. “I keep trying.” She laughs. “It’s crazy.”

A native of China, Li, 19, came to the United States with her family when she was 9. In her village, school stopped at the junior high level, and she says her parents made the move to Chinatown, New York, for their children’s education. “[College has] always been in my mind because my parents always said I had to go to college,” she said. “It’s really a natural thing.”

Natural, perhaps, but not easy. First Li

had to learn English. She spent three years working in a small group with other recent immigrants and began integrating into traditional classes. But in eighth grade, she remembers, she still lacked confidence. “I didn’t want to speak in class at all, and when [the teacher] would ask me a question I would just stay quiet until she asked someone else.” Over time she developed more confidence, and teachers recognized her hard work.

Li was one of 10 students from her high school selected for Posse—a foundation that identifies high-achieving students from public high schools in major cities and prepares them for the rigor of some of America’s most selective colleges. Posse scholars are paired with participating schools, which give them full-tuition scholarships. Li remembers thinking, “If I don’t get the scholarship there’s no way I can go to a private school.” Her parents, who first worked in clothing factories putting buttons on shirts and tags into bags, were, at the time, working long

◀ *"He's just like this little sponge," said Vicki Strobbridge of her son, Josh Montague '06, a physics major. "From the time he was small it was always 'why?'" Mother and son, who share a love of books, stroll through the Colby bookstore over Family Homecoming Weekend in October.*

hours in the family's Chinatown bakery. Asking her parents to help pay for college was not an option. "I just feel like it's another burden for them, and I don't want to burden them," she said.

While Li didn't expect help financially, she also knew not to expect help with the college application process, which she began before she was selected for Posse. "Everything I fill out by myself and [my parents] just signed their name when they had to," she said. This may be an extreme situation, but studies show that many first-generation college students navigate the application process alone or with the help of a college counselor—often one charged with helping hundreds of students. Still, counselors manage to make the difference for many first-generation students.

That was the case for Josh Montague, a Colby senior, co-captain of the indoor and outdoor track teams, a dean's-list physics major with a minor in computer science, a member of the popular a cappella group the Colby 8, and the first in his family to attend

reader, instilled in him a love of books. As he went through school, he cherished challenges. "I really loved multiplication under pressure," he remembers. "I still really enjoy learning." He plans to continue and is applying to some of the nation's top Ph.D. programs in physics. Support from his parents, from the beginning, kept him aiming to please, he said. "When I succeeded at anything they were always so excited and encouraging, and that continues to this day." His friends at Colby, he says, have also served as a support system. When he had difficulty writing papers early on, his friends who excelled in English helped him through.

Administrators at Colby worry about the ability of first-generation students, namely those from low-income brackets, to find their niche on a campus where the majority of students come from families where the parents attended college and often can afford to pay full tuition. At the Preview Program, a pre-orientation orientation for first-generation college students and minority students, Coordinator of Multicultural

of Jan Plans they can pursue, so while classmates are going off to Senegal on the Jan Plan they can't go because it costs an additional \$1300 or whatever it is, and other things like that," said Beverage. "Kids are going off to learn to ski at Sugarloaf and they'd like to do that, but geez, they can't afford to do that." The examples go on.

Marchaland, who mentions skiing as the one thing that limits her socially, says she's "pretty laid back" about it. "It bothers me on occasion, but not very often because I realize that that's just the way they were brought up, and I was brought up differently. And there are a lot of kids who have a lot less money than me at Colby, too. I think they're more conscious of it than I am," she said. Those who have less money may be first-generation—or not. And you can't tell by looking at them.

While he was at Colby, only four friends knew about Cabada's teenage years in foster care, he said. He had worked hard to leave it all behind, so far away, and he didn't want it to follow him. After graduating from

The assumption that a private college like Colby is out of reach is common among first-generation college students.

college. Recounting the application process, he said, "I didn't have any parental figure to go to in that respect." Where his parents couldn't help, his rural Vermont high school could. His guidance counselor advised him on how many schools to apply to, including "reach" and "fall back" options. He applied to nine, was accepted to five, and chose Colby, where he has flourished.

Montague's passion for learning bloomed at an early age. His mother, who is an avid

Student Programs Joe Atkins emphasizes the importance of cultivating social bonds. He said he tells the students, "Academics is number one, but if you think you can survive just on academics, you can't." He encourages them to get involved in clubs and organizations, which offer diverse choices for diverse interests.

But for some students, social life can be hindered by insufficient funds. "They get here, they're somewhat restricted in terms

Colby in May, the sociology major landed an Americorps*VISTA position in Fort Kent, Maine. A rural northern-Maine community may seem worlds away from South Central LA—and couldn't be much farther and still in the U.S.—but Cabada has found common ground. Of his Americorps mission, Cabada said: "The goal is to inspire students to go on to college or some form of post-secondary school." He serves as proof that it can be done.