

# Heart of a Tiger: Empowering First-Generation College Students at Fort Hays State University

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By Tisa Mason

HAYS, Kan. - First-Generation College Celebration (FGCC) is an annual event raising awareness of first-generation college students and highlighting their achievements and experiences. Launched in 2017, the celebration recognizes the successes of the first-generation community. It is also a significant date, as November 8 marks the signing of the Higher Education Act ("HEA") of 1965, which established federal financial aid programs and made vital investments in colleges and universities, particularly benefiting limited-income, first-generation college students.

The term "first-generation" has been used in higher education for decades. Still, with shifting demographics, increasing enrollment of first-gen students, rising tuition costs, and a focus on graduation rates, the experiences of first-generation college students have become a renewed area of focus in postsecondary education.

As an institution dedicated to providing accessible, quality education, Fort Hays State University prioritizes welcoming and supporting first-generation college students. Our programs and services, such as the First to Finish Living Learning Community, aim to assist our students in their academic, career, and professional development.

The First to Finish Living Learning Community is designed to foster leadership growth among first-gen students by offering introductory leadership courses and a CORE (confidence, optimism, resilience, and engagement) leadership model. Our goal is to provide a pathway for students to navigate campus and community resources, explore engagement opportunities, and create career goals. Additionally, we prioritize assisting students in navigating campus services such as academic advising, career services, financial aid, and student employment opportunities, ensuring they feel supported throughout their college journey.

Our students also participate in various co-curricular experiences, including service projects and leadership opportunities. One of the signature co-curricular experiences is the Ad Astra First Generation Conference, where students travel to a Kansas university to engage in a two-day conference for first-generation college students.

To build a pipeline of support, we initiated a second-year community in 2019. This community aims to continue supporting students during their second or third year and includes a peer mentoring component. Students in this community are connected with the First to Finish community, allowing for networking and additional support.

Students in the First to Finish Living Learning Community are encouraged to complete the leadership certificate or minor to enhance their leadership skills and knowledge further. The second-year community, driven by the confidence and engagement gained in the first year, inspires the first-year living-learning community students, demonstrating what success can look like for first-generation college students. Becoming a first-generation college graduate can profoundly impact future generations, and we celebrate the achievements of our students who pave the way for others.

In celebration of the First-Generation College Celebration, I want to highlight the stories of some of our students.

Hailing from Holcomb, Kansas, Derek Mesa embarked on his journey at FHSU in the fall of 2020 amidst the challenges posed by pandemic protocols and limited student engagement. Recounting his initial visit to the campus during Tiger Day 2019, Derek was drawn to Fort Hays due to its exceptional experience. However, his expectations of finding friends exactly like him were exceeded as he and his fellow First to Finish Living Learning Community members realized the beauty of diversity in their newfound friendships.

Amid diverse backgrounds and interests, Derek was surrounded by friends from various majors, providing a unique opportunity to learn about their distinct experiences at Fort Hays. The programs at FHSU played a crucial role in Derek's success, equipping him with real-world career and professional experiences. Through his courses and club involvement, he absorbed invaluable knowledge that will shape his future career.

Currently a senior health and human performance major, Derek envisions continuing his education in graduate school and gaining classroom experience as a graduate teacher's assistant. Setting his sights even further, he aspires to work at a college or a facility akin to HaysMed's Center for Health Improvement after earning his master's degree.

Derek fondly reflects on his lifelong appreciation for education, instilled by his parents since kindergarten. With unwavering support from his dad, mom, and brother, Derek emphasizes that his degree may bear his name, but its achievement would have been impossible without his family's assistance. Their unwavering belief in his aspirations has enabled him to pursue opportunities they never had.

Melissa Nunez's journey from growing up in Topeka, Kansas, to attending FHSU is inspiring. Originally from California, she joined the First to Finish Living Learning Community in the fall of 2021. Melissa, a junior studying business management, dreams of owning her own business. However, her immediate goal after college is to oversee a company or business and establish her name as a business professional.

Reflecting on her time at FHSU, Melissa finds it challenging to pinpoint a favorite memory because she cherishes every aspect of being part of the program. The First to Finish Living Learning Community experience helped her step out of her comfort zone, allowing her to be authentic. It taught her there is always room for growth and learning. This newfound confidence has permeated all aspects of her life: school, work, and personal experiences.

Melissa's college journey holds great significance for her. She contemplated dropping out after a turbulent first semester of her freshman year. However, with her family's and professors' support, she realized she was simply in the wrong major. The decision to change majors proved life-changing; she knows it was the best choice she could have made. Melissa's determination and resilience have made her family exceptionally proud, especially considering the opportunities they never had.

Embracing every aspect of her college experience, pushing boundaries, and seizing opportunities, Melissa has transformed her journey into a tale of perseverance and growth. Her story inspires others who may find themselves at a crossroads, showing them that incredible success is within reach with the right support and self-belief.

Efren Tarango Fernandez, a Technology Studies (Construction Management) student, hails from Chihuahua, Mexico, specifically a ranch called El Chamizal. Last fall, he was a member of the First to Finish Living Learning Community, an experience that has profoundly impacted his college journey. The program provided Efren with a valuable opportunity to connect with other first-generation students, providing constant motivation in his academic pursuits. Moreover, he forged lifelong friendships with instructors, leaders, and fellow students, creating a supportive network beyond the classroom.

Efren draws inspiration from his sister, the first in their family to attend college, who continues to set a remarkable example for him and his brother. She consistently lends her assistance and support whenever he needs it most. Growing up, Efren's parents courageously uprooted their lives in Mexico and migrated to the United States to provide their children with opportunities they never had. They continue to make sacrifices, dedicating time and money to ensure their children's success and realize the American Dream. Efren's college journey fills his parents with pride and a deep sense of accomplishment. They relish witnessing their children flourish and courageously pursue their diverse career paths.

Membership in the First to Finish Living Learning Community program facilitated new friendships for Efren and propelled him out of his comfort zone through interactive class structures and dynamic classmates. His leadership role within the program enabled him to foster lasting connections that persist to this day. Whether conversing on the way to class, socializing around campus, or engaging with each other in public, these friends have become an integral part of Efren's college experience. The profound impact of the First to Finish Living Learning Community has instilled in him a desire to become even more involved in student organizations, such as Tiger Team, the Associated General Contractors, Alpha Kappa Psi, and Catholic Tiger.

Efren's college journey exemplifies the transformative power of perseverance and a strong support system. From the First to Finish Living Learning Community program to his unwavering family support, he has found the motivation to thrive academically and navigate the challenges of pursuing his dreams. Through his story, Efren shows us the profound impact of our connections, the importance of family, and the unlimited potential within each of us.

I love how we engage and support our students, fostering their growth and helping them reach their full potential. From the moment they walk through our doors to the day they graduate, we provide a nurturing environment that allows them to flourish. As someone who experienced being a first-generation college student, I understand the incredible transformation during this journey.

I vividly recall how gaining knowledge and skills during my time as a student empowered me to envision a future I had never thought possible. The opportunities that emerged as a result were beyond my wildest dreams. It was remarkable to witness the positive impact of gaining an education on my life.

My personal story drives my unwavering commitment to education and helping others succeed. I deeply appreciate the value education brings, as it granted me the opportunity to one day pay it forward and serve as a university president. This privilege allows me to inspire and empower countless students, helping them realize their potential and achieve their goals.

By combining our passion for student success, dedication to supporting their growth, and providing the tools they need to navigate the world beyond graduation, we can continue to create a vibrant university community that transforms lives. Together, we can make a lasting impact and contribute to a future filled with endless possibilities.

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