

# FIRST-GEN FACULTY STORIES



## Megan Lazorski, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor,  
Department of Chemistry

### What was your experience like as a FIRST-GEN STUDENT?

In general, my experience was very exciting, inspiring, and rewarding. I always felt like I was doing something intrepid and special for myself and for my family. On the other hand though, there were many things that seemed quite unintuitive, which made me feel like I was somehow out of place or missing a piece to the puzzle. I often felt like I needed to work much harder to achieve similar results to my peers, and even if I looked comparable “on paper” I always felt behind. This was not necessarily a bad thing because it strengthened my already hefty work ethic and allowed me to prove to myself just how hard I could push myself to achieve my goals. However, as I moved on to graduate school, I had more tasks and I had to divide my time even more finely. This experience forced me to study more efficiently instead of just studying more. This experience also helped me realize that there is such a thing as overworking and over-studying and those behaviors tanked my efficiency. I still struggle with this issue to this day! However, I try to remind myself that hard work is not the same as constantly overworking, and a balanced life is a goal for everyone though what looks like is likely to be different for each person.

### What advice do you have for other FIRST-GEN STUDENTS?

My first piece of advice is to ask questions: ask your advisors, ask your friends, and definitely ask your professors (Go to office hours! We are so bored and want to help you in office hours! If we seem bothered, we aren't. We probably just have a funny looking thinking-face, I promise!). As a first generation student, we missed out on some things just because it wasn't inherent in our family lives growing up. That does not mean that our families don't support us and do everything they can to help us succeed, but until you walk through a maze yourself, it is nearly impossible to draw a map for someone else to navigate the maze. This is where some of the extra work of being first-gen can be hidden. However, evidenced by the fact that you have made it through the application/admissions process into college, it shows that you are resourceful, resilient, and you have grit. As it turns out, grit, not IQ or other intelligence metrics, is one of the major indicators of success in all fields. Growing up in a first-gen household gives us a leg-up in the grit department! However, we have to use that resourcefulness, resilience, and grit to fill-in-the-blanks about college, and to do that, you've got to identify what you need to know and find that information by asking questions.

My second piece of advice is to practice consistent self-care. Like I said above, studying harder does not guarantee better grades and can actually end up killing your efficiency and understanding in some cases. So instead of studying harder, study smarter. I know, I know, everyone has heard THAT before... but how do you actually DO that? Well, here are some tips: **(1) GET ENOUGH SLEEP**, sleep is incredibly undervalued and it is so important, check out these fascinating videos on the benefits of sleep (<https://ed.ted.com/lessons/the-benefits-of-a-good-night-s-sleep-shai-marcu> and [https://www.ted.com/talks/matt\\_walker\\_sleep\\_is\\_your\\_superpower/transcript?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/matt_walker_sleep_is_your_superpower/transcript?language=en)), **(2) Eat healthy food** (<https://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/foods-linked-to-better-brainpower>), **(3) Get regular exercise** (<http://www.brainrules.net/exercise?scene=>), **(4) develop consistent mindfulness and relaxation practices** (<https://www.msudenver.edu/counsel/self-help/resources/mindfulness/resources/>), and finally **(5) develop efficient study skills** like those shared in this book by Dr. Sandra Yancy McGuire, an expert in meta-cognitive learning practices : <https://www.amazon.com/Teach-Yourself-How-Learn-Strategies/dp/1620367564> (I've requested copies for the library).

My final piece of advice is to follow your passion. If you are passionate about something, you will naturally want to work at it that much harder and the work will be much more fun!

### How did you get to where you are TODAY?

Grit, Determination, Perseverance, Passion, Hard-Work, Luck, and Support. I was incredibly lucky to have parents that whole-heartedly supported my academic pursuits, and they helped me as much as they could every step of the way! Even with that support system, my path went up, down, two-steps forward, and then one-step back many, many times. I didn't have a lot of money, which led me to think outside-of-the-box in order to pursue opportunities. For example, I was a double major in chemistry and studio art for my undergraduate studies and I wanted to research photosensitive glass for my senior independent study project to mix the two disciplines. To pursue that goal, I wrote a grant for funding to travel to Alfred, New York and study glass science at Alfred University. However, the grant funds and the short-term rental options were limited in Alfred, New York so I lived in a tent in a near-by campground that summer. Another good example occurred after my postdoctoral fellowship ended. I was unemployed for a few months, got into a major car accident (not my fault) and finally secured a job teaching one section of introductory chemistry in Raleigh, NC. The pay was very low and I couldn't pay my bills, so I ended up moonlighting as a barista while applying for every professorship under the sun in my spare time. I finally got a visiting teaching position at the Claremont Colleges, for which I had to move cross-country to Claremont, CA on a meager moving stipend. Since the position was temporary by nature, I kept applying for permanent tenure-track professorships all over the country all the while teaching three classes. Alas, all of those preliminary trials paid off when I was offered a professorship at MSUDenver. Inspired and ready to be the professor I've always wanted to be, I continue to push myself in my teaching and research practices to bring you all the best educational experience I can! I hope to see you all someday in my classes!

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## Kristy Lyons

Associate Professor,  
Department of Psychological Sciences

### What was your experience like as a **FIRST-GEN STUDENT**?

I had a great time in my classes, where I felt like I knew how to be a student. But I struggled with the processes of college - figuring out a major, trying to find a way to pay for my rent, bills, and eat. I also worried a lot about what I'd do after college but had no idea how to actually figure out a career plan. I also felt a kind of disconnect when I went home - like I couldn't really talk to anyone in my family about what my college experience was like because it felt too fancy or out of touch. None of my friends at school were first gen (that I knew of) and my friends from high school who went to college all seemed to have a very different experience because their parents were paying for school and their rent and even giving them spending money! I felt kind of in my own little bubble where I couldn't be my full authentic self with anyone.

### What advice do you have for other **FIRST-GEN STUDENTS**?

Three things: (1) Ask for help! You can say 'I don't even know what I am supposed to be asking but I need some help.' The faculty and staff at MSU Denver are here because we want to support students in achieving their dreams. Reach out and we will help you. (2) Don't let failure get you down. The more you strive to stretch yourself, the more you will struggle and the more you will fail. Instead of thinking that it is a sign that you are not good enough, think about it as a sign that you need to figure out a new way to solve the problem. For example, recently I ran for an elected position and lost and then sent an email asking about it to the whole College of Letters and Sciences faculty email list by accident (eek!). It stung and I was super embarrassing for a day. But, now I know that I need to be super careful about not hitting reply all and if I want to run for another position I need to do more active campaigning. (3) You are not alone in being first gen (half of our student body is!) and it is something you should be really proud of. It was not easy to get to where you are today. You are an inspiration for your younger siblings and cousins and young people from your neighborhood. And, you make MSU Denver a better place by being here. Bring your voice and your experiences to your classes - your classmates can learn a lot from you.

### How did you get to where you are **TODAY**?

A mix of luck and hard work. I learned how to study when I was in college and I spent a lot of time on it. I also took advantage of every opportunity that was presented. For example, the picture of me in college is from my first poster presentation at the Cal Poly research symposium (similar to the URC here at MSU Denver). I also worked several jobs (as a house cleaner, working the register in a pizza restaurant, and in my campus library on work study funds), volunteered as a Girl Scout troop leader, served as a research assistant for a psychology professor, and was very involved in my university honors program and the psychology honors society. It was exhausting but I think all of this bolstered my applications for PhD programs. And I also got really lucky in that I was wait-listed at my first choice school and got into the program because someone else declined their offer.

I'm a developmental psychologist so I think a lot about why people end up having the life paths they do. The science clearly shows that there is a piece that has to do with your personal characteristics or behaviors, but there is also a huge piece that is environmental. Being a first-gen, female student coming from a low-income family the odds were stacked against me in some ways. But, as a multiracial person who is White presenting, I have also benefited from White privilege. And being cis-gender and heterosexual, I have faced less discrimination than many others in our community. So I have been able to 'make it' in spite of and because of the system. I hope that by making your way through school and by becoming a leader in our community, that you can help to change the system so that it is more fair and just for future generations of young people.

# FIRST-GEN FACULTY STORIES



## Katherine (Kat) Martinez, Ph.D.

They/them/theirs; She/her/hers  
Associate Professor and Director/Chair  
Gender, Women, and Sexualities Studies  
Gender Institute for Teaching and Advocacy



THE GENDER  
INSTITUTE  
FOR TEACHING  
& ADVOCACY  
MSU DENVER

### What was your experience like as a **FIRST-GEN STUDENT**?

Being a first-generation undergraduate student was challenging. I enrolled in a primarily White institution, because I received a scholarship that would pay for four years of college. Having this financial stability was a privilege I had earned but being in this environment with many students who had unearned (class and race) privileges was a daily reminder that I did not quite belong. I did not know how to be a student: how to take notes, how to study, which classes to choose, how to become involved in campus activities, how to engage with faculty, etc. By the end of my first year of school, I had determined that I was going to quit and move back to my hometown in Southwestern Colorado to be closer to my family. The only reason I stayed in school was because of a TRiO mentor who encouraged me to keep trying. And I did, eventually graduating and deciding to enroll in graduate school, which was even more difficult as a first-generation student. However, it was in graduate school that I found my voice, found my people, and found my calling as a teacher. I still experienced imposter syndrome, I still doubted myself and my abilities, but learned that I deserved to be in the classroom and I deserved the opportunities afforded other students.

### What advice do you have for other **FIRST-GEN STUDENTS**?

Don't let the system or the people within it bring you down. People and institutions may make you feel as if you do not belong, but you do! Systems and bureaucracy may make it all feel pointless at times, but your work is not. Keep pushing forward and making space for yourself and those who follow. Keep asking questions, even when you think you are the only one with them...you are not! Find your people--even if it is only one person, find that one who is able to help you celebrate your successes. Don't forget those who helped you along the way, because they are still rooting for you.

### How did you get to where you are **T O D A Y**?

- I had a mother who always believed in me and wanted more for me...still does.
- I had a passion for books and for learning...still do.
- I had a TRiO mentor who encouraged me to keep trying.
- I had some awful faculty in graduate school who said I would never make it...I pushed harder.
- I had grad school friends who made me feel at home...RIP Matt and Zach.
- I was in the right place at the right time and had a supervisor who believed in me... thanks, Arlene!
- I work hard and dance harder.

# FIRST-GEN FACULTY STORIES



## Nicholas Recker, Ph.D.

Professor,  
Sociology & Anthropology

### What was your experience like as a **FIRST-GEN STUDENT**?

I greatly enjoyed the college experience. I loved that it was possible to take classes on interesting topics, taught by experts in their field. However, being a first-generation college student came with a learning curve. I had to navigate the academics and also the organization (student housing, financial aid, the health center, etc.). While intimidating at first, eventually I learned the process and could enjoy my time in college.

### What advice do you have for other **FIRST-GEN STUDENTS**?

Ask as many questions as you can. Metro State is full of Faculty, Staff, and Students who are happy to help out. In my 11 years at Metro State, I have not heard a bad question. I would also encourage first-generation students to get involved. There are many student groups and opportunities for employment around campus. It is a great way to meet people and gain experience.

### How did you get to where you are **T O D A Y**?

The two biggest items which helped me were: great mentoring and staying on track. I was lucky to meet people who understood my goals and gave great advice. Additionally, I worked hard to make good progress towards my degree every semester. COVID-19 makes staying on track difficult (in addition to work and family obligations), though Metro State is working to help students succeed in spite of these obstacles.

# FIRST-GEN FACULTY STORIES



## **Devon Wright, Ph.D.**

History B.A., M.A.

Sociology Ph.D.

Africana Studies, Assistant Professor

### **What was your experience like as a FIRST-GEN STUDENT?**

My experience as a first-year student wasn't very difficult. I was pretty much a nerd in high school and very motivated academically and studious. College was a much better experience for me than high school was, particularly because of the freedom to pick your classes according to your preferences. I am not a morning person at all and I loved taking later afternoon and evening courses.

### **What advice do you have for other FIRST-GEN STUDENTS?**

My advice to first gen students is to take college very seriously. Do your best to earn as high a grade as possible in every class so you can graduate with the highest GPA possible. Why? Because after graduation most students will very quickly realize that a Bachelor's degree isn't enough in today's society. So most will want to go on to graduate school, which is more expensive than undergraduate studies. However, many graduate programs offer scholarships in the form of teacher's assistantships. These will pay for 100% of your tuition, but to get them you will need a competitive GPA.

### **How did you get to where you are TODAY?**

I got to where I am today by being disciplined with my studies, realistic with my goals and by challenging myself to improve areas of weakness in my skill set and overall life. I will admit that there were times when I could have challenged myself a lot more, but like all students, I'm human and not a robot. We need restful breaks. So work hard towards earning well-deserved fun time!