

Second Home for First-Gens

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As thousands of low-income, first-generation freshmen flock to campus in the next two months, many, despite their intelligence and optimism, will arrive only to be gone in an academic eye blink. Just 11 percent of them earn a bachelor's degree after six years, according to the Pell Institute, compared with 55 percent of their peers.

That fact was frustrating administrators at the University of Cincinnati, where more than 40 percent of its 5,000 freshmen this fall will be the first in their families to go to college. In its mission to get low-income, first-generation students through its doors, the university was succeeding. But once in, many were failing.

"These students find themselves on campus, and overwhelmed quickly," says Stephanie A. Cappel, the executive director of Partner for Achieving School Success, a center devoted to university-community partnerships and outreach programs. "They don't even know what questions to ask."

To teach them how to ask the essential questions, the university opened a novel theme house last September. "I see this as a runway, with the kids taking off from here," Dr. Cappel says.

The Gen-1 Theme House began its first year with 15 students, mostly minorities and all eligible for low-income Pell grants. Eight ultimately accepted the house's academic focus and strict rules (no alcohol or overnight visitors, midnight curfew on weeknights and 3 a.m. on weekends). The other seven either found the rules too constricting and moved out, or were evicted for breaking them. This fall, 20 or so new freshmen are expected to enter the house, which is overseen by Dr. Cappel's center.

When I visited last semester, the students at the Gen-1 House were a bit shy and full of nervous laughter. Still, they were college freshmen, filled with that heady mix of uncertainty and knowing that the world was made just for them. But as children of no privilege, they take nothing for granted. They are the sons and daughters of single parents, of hairdressers and woodworkers. They see college as an escape from their old lives, and as a way to set an example for their sisters and brothers.

"Both my parents were high school dropouts," says Jennifer Abrefa, who earned A's in high school. "But I always had dreams of leading the good life. I've always wanted to go to college. I've always wanted that degree. I have to keep my eyes on the prize."

Ms. Abrefa, who grew up in the South Bronx before her family moved to Columbus, Ohio, and who wants to be a nurse, is the oldest of six children. She understands all too well the gravitational pull that home can exert. "I always thought I'd go back to New York to go to school," she says. "But my mom had another baby, and she wanted me to stay close. Every time something goes wrong at home, I'm the one people want to call."

She tries to keep family demands in perspective: “My biggest challenge has been to stay focused. I’m not here to fool around.” One house rule is no going home for the first five weeks.

Kendall Peterson, a biochemistry major, knows that the eyes of his family are on him. He’s the youngest of his mother’s children but the oldest of his father’s. “I’m the big brother of my dad’s kids,” he says, “so I try to set an example for my younger siblings, and for my nieces and nephews.”

The University of Cincinnati, a public research university of 20,000 undergraduates in the city center, has the feel of a green, hilly oasis. Down a hill on the far side of campus sits Stratford Heights, a cluster of modern residences that include theme houses dedicated to music, engineering and communications, as well as Gen-1. In the house on the common-area tables were copies of Seventeen, Black Enterprise and Rolling Stone. A large flat-screen television with a Nintendo GameCube held down one wall.

Learning takes place here. There are in-house tutoring and study sessions — sometimes mandatory, depending on a student’s grades. There is advising, counseling and mentoring by faculty members, administrators and peers. The program coordinator, Judith Mause, teaches a yearlong course for credit on the first year of college; it focuses on topics like study skills and time management. Gen-1 also wants to bring the university’s resources to students’ doorstep. Last year’s dinner guests included the dean of students, the director of ethnic programs and services, and financial aid advisers.

“You don’t know what you don’t know,” says Dr. Cappel, who has walked in her students’ shoes — she, like the other house administrators, is a first-gen graduate. Dr. Cappel was widowed, in her late 20s and raising two children when she decided she needed to transform her life by going to college. “I was cleaning toilets,” she says.

As with any home, some Gen-1 residents felt they got too much attention. “The staff mean well, but they’re on our backs too much, increasing the stress we already feel,” Ms. Abrefa says. “They expect us to be perfect in a way. But we’re going to make mistakes, and learn from them.”

Adds Amber Lofton, her roommate, “Sometimes it’s suffocating.”

Indeed, the students give up some freedom — including their right to make potentially poor decisions — in exchange for a better shot at academic success. (Students sign a contract, committing to all the house’s rules.) “We are very paternalistic,” says Bob Sues, the project director. “We are intentionally in their faces.”

First-generation students struggle for many reasons. They aren’t prepared, they don’t get help choosing a college that’s the right fit, their families often discourage them. Because they don’t understand college culture, they draw back rather than immerse themselves.

“The problems of the first year fall disproportionately on first-generation and economically disadvantaged students,” says John N. Gardner, executive director of the Policy Center on the First Year of College. “You’re an immigrant. You have to become assimilated. But there’s no Ellis Island for these students.”

Many institutions have special programs. Florida Memorial University, near Miami, has a program called Black Male College Explorers, whose goal is to recruit, keep and graduate first-

generation black men. Fresno State University is using a grant award to provide first-generation students with extra help and remediation in mathematics and English. Both Carroll University in Waukesha, Wis., and College of Idaho focus on Latino first-generation students.

At the University of Cincinnati, the residential aspect is crucial, according to Ms. Mause, because for students to succeed they “need to be embedded in the university environment.” The Gen-1 Theme House is to be an anchor as the students learn to navigate the university and to be their own advocates. “There’s nobody in your world to show you,” Ms. Mause says.

This past year, the residents’ grades ranged from struggling-to-achieve-C’s to dean’s list. All of the students plan to return to school this fall, and some will mentor the incoming class. House alumni — only one or two will stay on as “sophomore ambassadors” — are being encouraged to take advantage of a new universitywide support program to smooth the way to the second year.

Administrators hope to improve retention this year. “In spite of our better judgment, we accepted a couple of students who shouldn’t have been,” Dr. Cappel says of the seven residents who left the house but remained at the university. Applications include an interview and an essay on why they want to be in the house. “This year,” she adds, “we’re telling the students that if you don’t have the academic goals, this isn’t the place for you.”

Dr. Cappel acknowledges some concern before the house opened that residents might be stigmatized as poor. But the students “thought it was cool to belong to the house,” she says, adding, “They wanted it printed on sweatshirts.”

The house became their extended family. Jalisa Harris, who grew up in the West End of Cincinnati and is studying criminal justice, values the common ground. Whether pressures from home or lack of money, “I can talk about any of the stuff in my past with my fellow first-gen students,” she says, adding, “They’ve dealt with the same things I’ve dealt with.”

The students say that a lot of the best teaching they experienced came from one another. “Amber has taught me to keep moving forward,” Ms. Abrefa says. “She’s like a sister to me. We’re closer than sisters. Gosh, I love Amber. We don’t want to follow in our parents’ footsteps. We have taught each other a lot.”

Ms. Abrefa and Ms. Lofton, who is studying theater, plan to room together this coming year.

“She’s my best friend,” Ms. Lofton says of Ms. Abrefa. “We will come down to our last two dollars, and we will split it.”

And what lesson could be better than that?

Colleges nationwide are trying to address the special needs of first-generation students, including the colleges below, which have received grants for innovative approaches to recruiting and retaining them.

First-generation college students find a new family, and future.