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## **It's All about Relationships**

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## FACULTY ESSAY

# It's all about relationships

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Linfield students and their families come from all walks of life. In the fall of 2019, a record 42 percent of first-year Linfield students arrived on campus with the desire to become members of the first generation in their families to earn a college degree

from a four-year institution.

As a former first-generation student, I was attracted to teaching biology at Linfield by our large first-gen student population. I'm drawn to mentorship in academia because it enables me to connect students with significant opportunities, the types of opportunities that led me from a nascent interest in biology to a lifetime of teaching and research in the field of genetics.

It's noteworthy that many Linfield faculty members are first-generation, and Linfield now has a first-gen college president, Miles K. Davis. Nationwide, as the percentage of first-gen college students grows, leaders in higher education are exploring what this means for the undergraduate experience. At Linfield, faculty and staff are thoughtfully learning from our existing first-gen students while designing programming aimed to help incoming first-gen students develop a greater sense of belonging and individual paths to success. The Linfield First program is a new living laboratory for mentorship strategies that have the potential to shape the overall experience for all students at Linfield.

Students' backgrounds shape their perceptions of college. My parents instilled in me the belief that education was the key to success, and that college was a costly but worthwhile stepping stone. I began college with the notion that my studies were pre-professional preparation for a healthcare career. Only after I shadowed a medical doctor and then, at the urging of a mentor, explored my interest in scientific

research and added an English major did I discover my true path. I could not have conceived of that path before college. I initially harbored misconceptions about the utility of different college majors, and I had no idea that graduate school could provide me with a sufficient salary and health insurance immediately after graduation, two things I absolutely required. Engaged mentorship from faculty and upperclassmen prevented me from shutting the door to opportunities that would ultimately shape my career as a scientist.

As a faculty member I have witnessed great diversity in our first-gen students, making individual mentorship a necessity. Students sometimes describe feeling guilty when they encounter the wealth of opportunities not available to their parents or close family and friends. These feelings of guilt can lead students to overcommit themselves as they try to take advantage of every opportunity, and then flounder as they overzealously plunge into their college experience. Conversely, many first-gen students miss out on opportunities simply because they are unsure if they are welcome to join in; far too often, I encounter students reluctant to "bother" faculty during office hours or via email, missing crucial opportunities for the connection and guidance that are the hallmarks of a small college. Demanding employment schedules can also be a difficult burden that thwarts the academic efforts of the ambitious and reluctant alike. Mentorship can mitigate the effects of these challenges.

Many first-gen students also describe feeling the effects of "imposter syndrome," which includes the persistent fear that they do not belong, and that this fact will be revealed. Imposter syndrome stems from the belief that achievements are due to luck rather than skill, ability and hard work. The seemingly small but additional effort of a Linfield community member acknowledging student achievements can help students to successfully navigate self-imposed roadblocks.

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Successfully earning a college degree requires more than completing graduation requirements. Both in and out of the classroom, the teaching and learning among Linfield community members generate unique opportunities for students to build pathways to futures they couldn't fully imagine before they began their studies. While opportunities at Linfield are abundant, they are worthless if students do not find them, or do not take advantage of them. Building relationships is essential – never again are there so many life-changing experiences through the next open door.

Opportunities that are good for first-gen students are good for all students; developing a sense of belonging and mentorship is crucial. In my courses, I begin the first day of class with a student questionnaire, followed by one-on-one

meetings with each of my students during the beginning of the term. During these brief, unscripted conversations, I learn about my students' interests and motivations, and aspects of their experiences and aspirations that might never come up in class. I make these connections to honor my own small-college undergraduate experience, in which faculty reached out to connect me to opportunities that began my scientific research career, revealed my love of teaching and led me to life-long learning.

I am inspired by the fact that Linfield is creating a new avenue for meaningful mentorship of our incoming students through the Linfield First program, and we will continue to act on what we learn.

– Catherine Reinke, associate professor of biology

## Linfield First builds sense of belonging

A new program, Linfield First, is deepening ties between first-generation students and the community.

The coordinated effort between students, faculty, staff and alumni includes a mentoring program, monthly luncheon, pre-orientation programming and scholarships.

“We want students to develop a sense of belonging at Linfield and become part of the community from the very beginning,” says Zeila Medina '20, first-generation program lead.

At the heart of the platform is more than 30 small mentor-mentee groups – each made up of four first-year students and three mentors (student, faculty, staff). Together, groups are exploring student strengths, needs and community resources to empower students for the future.

Last year, in preparation for the new program, focus groups of first-gen Linfield students discussed what it means to be first generation. One takeaway: first-gen students are united by their diversity; their beliefs, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, support structures, responsibilities, and reasons for attending college may all be different. But they all have one thing in common: they are all leaders, groundbreakers in their respective families.