

New Walsh University students embracing mentorship of First Gen Cavs program

s goal is to help and encourage students navigate the college experience

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Key Points

- Roughly 1-in-3 college students are first-generation; at Walsh it's 45%.
 - Edna McCulloh, a associate vice president for academic administration at Walsh, launched the First Gen Cavs program.
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NORTH CANTON – A Walsh University administrator is using her personal experience to benefit the latest generation of college students through a new initiative.

Edna McCulloh, associate vice president for academic administration at Walsh, has launched First Gen Cavs, a mentoring program for students who are the first in their families to attend college.

Roughly 1 in 3 college students are first-generation; at Walsh it's 45%.

"The design of the program offers intentional opportunities for engagement with, and celebration of first-generation students, and provides a foundation for success in the first year of college and beyond," she said.

McCulloh said the challenges can vary. Workload expectations, finances and paperwork can be a maze for those with no previous exposure to college.

"For some students, it's a struggle that their family didn't want them to come to college in the first place," she said. "They can't see the return on the investment for the student. There are parents who do support them, like mine, but they don't know how to navigate the

paperwork. It can be as something simple as we have a young lady who has to share a computer in her household."

Another challenge for some is just trying to stay engaged. "Because they don't have a lot of support at home; their biggest champions are here," she said. "We can't be mom and dad, per se, but we can be champions to keep them encouraged."

First Gen Cavs program at Walsh University

McCulloh, a native of Muskegon, Michigan, was the first of five siblings to earn a college degree. The experience planted the earliest seeds of what would become First Gen Cavs.

"I was a first-gen student myself and received a lot of support from many throughout my undergrad years and even into my first job from folks who really guided me and wanted to see me be successful," she said. "Because of that, I always wanted to pay it forward."

McCulloh worked as the first assistant registrar at Baker College, her alma mater, before relocating to Youngstown State University, then to Walsh in 1998.

"When I came to Walsh, I realized there were a lot of first-gen college students here like myself," she said. "I was hired as the registrar when I came on board. Because I was extremely busy in that role, there never seemed to be the right time for us."

The opportunity arose when McCulloh focused her doctoral dissertation on first-generation students and how support from parents can make difference. It became the springboard for the initiative.

"We really were excited to put this on campus," McCulloh said. You get surveys asking what you're doing for your first-year students on campus. We support all of our students with resources, but I wanted something intentional, and I feel like that's what we were able to do that with this program."

Each student enrolled has a mentor from the Walsh faculty or administrative staff. This fall, students who have gone through the program will be able to serve as peer mentors.

Walsh University student embraces first-gen program

McCulloh is a mentor for America Villegas-Camacho, an honor student majoring in biology/pre-med with a minor in medical humanities. One of 33 students enrolled in the initiative, Villegas-Camacho also works as a patient-care nurse's aide at Cleveland Clinic Mercy Hospital in Canton.

"It was a blessing," she said. "Being first generation ... I was looking for opportunities, trying to talk to different professors and staff members and I found Dr. Edna with her big smile and she just embraced me so generously. I was so thankful to have that support. She told me she was first-generation herself and there was this program they offered."

The daughter of Mexican immigrants, Villegas-Camacho is the first in her immediate family to complete high school, and soon college. Her two younger sisters plan to follow in her path.

Villegas-Camacho said her parents' sacrifice and work ethic, and her mother's bout with breast cancer, has inspired her to pursue medical school and a career as an obstetrician/gynecologist.

"They've always supported higher education," she said. "I knew their struggles. I saw it in their eyes."

Villegas-Camacho said she's had previous mentors but McCulloh has been invaluable.

"As soon as she told me about the program, I was hooked and definitely excited about it and what it could offer me because I had so many questions. I'm determined to be here and blessed to be here."

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