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CEDAR FALLS — When Samantha Salvas was in junior high, the idea of going to college someday was as distant as the concept of $1 billion.

“At that age nothing really connects, and they can say that you need to go to college, but that doesn’t tell you what that means,” said Salvas, now 28.

It wasn’t until she got accepted into Classic Upward Bound, a federal program the University of Northern Iowa uses to help low-income and first-generation high-schoolers, that she saw college as a possibility.

Life happened along the way. She didn’t complete college right out of high school. But thanks to other federal programs, she’s determined to become the first college graduate in her family.

“Life keeps throwing me curveballs. I keep getting right back up, and getting back into it, because I know even at almost 30, I’m nowhere even close to what I can do in my life,” said Salvas, a junior at UNI.
First-generation students — whose parents did not earn a degree — have become a focus in higher education.

That’s in part to growing sensitivity to diversity and inclusion, a steady but flat enrollment in Iowa’s high schools and a push to get 70 percent of Iowans to get more than a high-school diploma.

The federal “Trio” programs have been under scrutiny. President Donald Trump’s proposed budget would eliminate two of the three educational opportunity programs.

Supporting first-generation students is nothing new at UNI. It has five of eight Trio programs — more than other state universities. Most date back to the 1980s. The programs are on campus and at the University of Northern Iowa Center for Urban Education, or UNI-CUE, in downtown Waterloo.

UNI also has a higher percentage of first-generation students. In UNI’s fall 2016 census, nearly 30 percent of students were first-generation, compared with 26 and 25 percent, respectively, at Iowa State University and University of Iowa.

UNI’s focus on first-generation students also shows in longtime faculty who have worked in the Trio programs.

“I truly believe that (if) we recruit you and we enroll you, then we should do everything we can to help you graduate,” said Wilfred “Mickye” Johnson, director of the Classic Upward Bound program.

Johnson mentored Salvas in Upward Bound. She called him first when she was ready to go back to school. He pointed her to the Educational Opportunity Center, a Trio program that helps nontraditional students.

Supporting success

UNI President Mark Nook told of a recent first-generation graduate at the June Board of Regents meeting.
“You’ve heard me talk about the sense of community and that when challenges come up on this campus, everybody’s got your back, and Felicia’s story is really just a great example of exactly that,” Nook said.

Many first-generation students get early support through the Jump Start program, which help students needing extra guidance for four days before classes start.

The program helped UNI senior Ricardo Garza, 21, so much he gave up part of his summer to work as a Pathfinder, students who help with Jump Start.

“If you’d told me 10 years ago, or even five years ago, that I’d be in Iowa leading a group of students, I would have called you crazy,” Garza said.

“I felt like coming through Jump Start, I was able to make … so many connections and meet so many people … it’s now like a home away from home,” Garza said.

Students who don’t come directly from high school, like Salvas, can use the Educational Opportunity Center — one of the Trio programs that would be eliminated in Trump’s budget.

Caitlin Novak, 22, was a traditional student who left private Central College in Pella due to cost. She’s now at UNI.

She’s new to the EOC, which serves 1,942 students each year, and found it could help her search for scholarships.

“I haven’t really used the resources as fully as I can yet, but I will. ... Why wouldn’t I use them?” Novak said.

Many students find their way to another Trio program on the UNI campus, Student Support Services.

Colice Sanders, an advising specialist with Student Support Services, was a first-generation, low-income student at UNI who benefited from Trio programs and now helps others like herself.
She helps students realize they can use the “grit” that got them to college to succeed.

Sanders and Mickye Johnson, who also was a first-generation student, recognize not just the need for first-generation students but the value.

“I think first-generation students really represent the American Dream,” Sanders said.

But Johnson adds a caveat.

“I truly believe that the next generation is going to face obstacles that we can’t even fathom ... (and) we must harvest our talent no matter where it comes from. I think colleges and universities are going to have to be more inclusive. ... We need these students and these students need us.”

Challenges

Even with the support first-generation students receive, challenges remain.

“Our students are dealing with some pretty complicated issues that they haven’t in the past,” Sanders said, sharing some of her own struggles such as finding child care, working full time and not having a car.

Novak was frustrated by how difficult it was to find financial aid information before she came to UNI. She worries about the debt she will face long after she completes college.

“I don’t think I was properly advised on what was to come for college, and I don’t think anybody was, because two years into college, all of us are sitting here, like, ‘Oh my gosh, what are we doing?’” Novak said.

Salvas, married with a six-year-old son, is concerned about child care and health care. She said being older, it’s harder to qualify for scholarships.

But most of all, she’s concerned the university doesn’t reach out well to nontraditional students, leaving them feeling less a part of the college community.
Garza is a traditional student, but can still feel like an outsider as a Latino from San Antonio at a predominantly white institution. He tries to stay positive and give people the benefit of the doubt.

Another challenge is convincing family of the importance of certain aspects of college — from extracurricular activities to the value of a single exam. It can also be hard to be 18 hours away from his family.

There’s also the weight of being the first to graduate.

“This is not only for me. This is for my family as well,” Garza said.

“I think first-generation students really represent the American Dream,” Sanders said. “To me, a part of that American Dream was about and is about a sort of foraging on this voyage or vision of what we could be, without really having a path or groundwork. That’s a first-generation student.” Colice Sanders, Student Support Services adviser