CHAPTER 3

The First Gen Photo Project: In Their Own Words

Lauren G. McClanahan

Part I: Background

Portrait photography has always been an interest of mine. I have no special training, or special equipment, and have always approached it more as a hobby—something I enjoy doing during my downtime. I like the planning that goes into creating a photo shoot with a client, such as outfits, locations, and the overall "vibe" of our time together. I also really like the conversations that happen during the photo shoots, how most people tend to start out really shy, but by the end are hamming it up for the camera and opening up to me as we go along. But most of all, I like the response I receive when people see their finished portraits for the first time. Reactions range from disbelief to excitement to tears of joy, especially when moms see portraits of their little ones. I believe that this process of getting to plan, shoot, and reflect on the process helps people to shape their identities: to design the best versions of themselves that they wish to put forward to the world. It's a powerful process to witness firsthand.

L. G. McClanahan (✉)
Department of Media Literacy, Western Washington University, Bellingham, WA, USA
e-mail: mcclanl@wwu.edu

A. G. Raj, S. H. Ulanoff (eds.), *Storying a Reflexive Praxis for Pedagogy*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-06588-0_3

In my day job, I am a Professor of Secondary Education at Western Washington University (WWU), a public, four-year comprehensive university in Bellingham, Washington, that is home to roughly 16,000 students. Of those, approximately 29% of our new, first-year students identify as being the first in their families to attend college or "first gen." This general university statistic is reflected in my classes in the College of Education as well, with about a quarter of my students identifying as first gen. Not being a first gen student myself, I admire my students who are and understand that the challenges that they face in college are in so many respects different from my own. The unwritten "language" of higher ed, the complexities of financial aid forms, and the culture of campus life mean different things to different students, especially for my first gen students, and all of those elements work differently to shape their college experience.

I remember several years ago being intrigued by the "Humans of New York" photo project, wherein the photographer would make portraits of people he met in the city and ask them to provide some information about themselves so that viewers might get a more complete picture of who they were and what their dreams and aspirations were. Inspired, I wondered if a similar format might work for my students who identified as first gen, who shared with me that sometimes the stereotypes that some first gen students face were in fact not true. Students shared with me that just because their parents did not attend college did not mean that they were not highly supportive of their children and their educational journey. My first gen students shared with me that they sometimes felt awkward in their classes, especially if they were among the only first generation students of color in that class. Together, my students and I wondered if having the opportunity to present counter-narratives of their lived experience would help other, future first gen students feel more at ease and at home in a culture that could sometimes feel cold and unwelcoming. Thus, the first gen photo project was born.

Part II: Theoretical Perspectives

Funds of Knowledge

The funds of knowledge concept, generally attributed to Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg (1992), describe the familial accumulation of various abilities, assets, bodies of knowledge, and cultural ways of being and interacting that were prevalent in US-Mexican households in Tucson, Arizona. These funds include factors such as economics, geography, politics, agriculture, technology, religion, language, and cooking, and are socially and

cognitively complex, yet are rarely recognized in schools as legitimate sites for knowledge. According to the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction of Washington State, K–12 teachers can identify students' funds of knowledge as

- Academic and personal background knowledge;
- Accumulated life experiences;
- Skills and knowledge used to navigate everyday social contexts; and
- Worldviews structured by broader historically and politically influenced social forces.

Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg (1992) emphasize a lack of recognition of these funds of knowledge in school settings, stating "Public schools often ignore the strategic and cultural resources, which we have termed funds of knowledge, that households contain. We argue that these funds not only provide the basis for understanding the cultural systems from which U.S.-Mexican children emerge, but that they also are important and useful assets in the classroom" (p. 313).

But it is not only public K–12 schools that fail to recognize the vast knowledge and skills that students bring with them to the classroom. Higher education, as well, is notorious for not valuing factors that many first generation college students possess when they arrive on campus. In fact, it can be the case that first generation college students are indeed lacking in some ways, not having had parents who have graduated from college and who, presumably, know how to "play the game." Here is where negative stereotypes can emerge and where first gen students can become grouped together with other underrepresented groups on campus. According to Marquez-Kiyama and Rios-Aguilar (2018), "The dominant narrative of under-represented students, particularly those attending community colleges, is that they are unprepared and not as committed to their educational endeavors as other, more successful college students" (p. 4). Marquez-Kiyama and Rios-Aguilar (2018) continue, stating:

> *[A] funds of knowledge approach can help faculty to consider students' backgrounds and living conditions as sources of valuable knowledge rather than mere impediments to college-level learning. Furthermore, it is important to move beyond knowing that students are busy and have many responsibilities. Instead, faculty could learn in a deeper way about how students (and their families) navigate their resources … and vulnerabilities (i.e., periods of unemployment, taking care of family members, financial scarcity, illness, etc.) in order to succeed in college. (p. 5)*

According to Marquez-Kiyama and Rios-Aguilar (2018), inclusive practices within classrooms can help to encourage a more hospitable learning experience for college students. They suggest that practices for inclusive pedagogy can include the following:

- Invite students to share their knowledge in multiple ways
- Collaborate with students as co-constructors of knowledge
- Establish critical dialogues with students
- Foster student choice. (p. 177)

The first gen photo project outlined in this chapter includes and embodies each of the above practices. By inviting students to co-construct knowledge in the form of self-representation using both text and photography, they are able to decide how to best articulate their experience of being a first generation college student. This co-construction includes choice, as well as critical dialogue before, during, and after each photo shoot.

Critical Literacy

Critical literacy invites each of us to focus on issues of power and is always, inherently, political (Janks, 2010; Luke & Freebody, 1999). According to Hobbs (2021), critical literacy asks questions, such as who benefits from specific texts and who is disadvantaged? Who is represented and who is left out? As a literacy professor, I practice critical literacy in all of my classes and encourage my students to continually ask these questions of any text they encounter, be it alphabetic, aural, or visual. Janks (2010) continues that line of thinking, stating:

> *A literacy teacher [is] someone who works with others to make meaning with or from texts. A critical literacy teacher is, in addition, interested in what all kinds of texts (written, visual and oral) do to readers, viewers and listeners and whose interests are served by what these texts do. They also help students to rewrite themselves and their local situations by helping them to pose problems and to act, often in small ways, to make the world a fairer place. (p. 19)*

Control over the production of various texts and the associated means of production are central to critical literacy for a number of reasons. According to Janks (2010), the ability to

- *Produce texts is a form of agency that enables us to choose what meanings to make;*
- *Construct texts gives us a better understanding of how texts are constructed and the affordances and constraints of different modes;*
- *Produce texts enables us to act on the world;*
- *Work actively with the combination and recombination of symbolic forms is a requirement for high-level work in a knowledge economy. It helps us think about how we are positioning ourselves and our readers by the choices we make as we write;*
- *Produce texts enables us to redesign our texts and the texts of others. It enables us to think about how to transform texts that we deconstructed to remake the world. (p. 156).*

Along the way, myriad decisions go into deciding how to create, or as Janks (2010) suggests, *design* various texts, regardless of medium. Implicit within each design decision and inherent in critical literacy are always considerations of power. "Designing emcompases the idea of productive power—the ability to harness the multiplicity of semiotic systems across diverse cultural locations to challenge and change existing discourses … combining and recombining those resources so as to create possibilities for transformation and reconstruction" (Janks, 2010, p. 25). In the case of the first gen photo project, students were doing just that—challenging existing discourses about what it means to be a first gen college student and creating possibilities to use their identities to transform not only themselves but students who will follow in their footsteps.

Part of the intentional counter-narrative aspect of portrait photography (or, arguably, the act of constructing any message, written or otherwise) involves the act of framing. When framing a photograph, the photographer, in tandem with or independent from their subject, makes choices as to what to include and what to leave out. As Szarkowski (1966) states, "[T]he photographer's central problem is a simple one: what shall he [sic] include and what shall he [sic] reject? The line of decision between in and out is the picture's edge" (p. 6). Put another way, the act of framing is the ultimate act of power for a photographer. According to Ewald (2001), "As photographers, we have almost godlike discretion when it comes to altering the appearance of things by simply where we look at them from—by changing our vantage point" (p. 66). Whether shooting from the top down, from the bottom up, close-up, or from a distance, framing matters and is key in determining how students want to write their worlds (Freire

& Macedo, 1987). As Ewald (2001) reminds us, "As photographers and writers, we are observers and recorders of the world, real and imagined. Who we are and where we stand when we watch the world determines how we see and what we record" (p. 29).

Discourse Analysis

Throughout the process of thinking more deeply about this long-term photography project, and in the process of translating that project into this chapter, I have relied upon various iterations of discourse analysis. Ultimately, the "texts" I am working from in my analysis include informal conversations I had with students during their photo shoots, the written statements that they provided after each shoot, and the finished product of the portrait with the associated text. According to Shanthi et al. (2015), discourse analysis is "a broad term used to analyze written and spoken text of peoples' discourse (text and talk) in everyday social context" (p. 163).

One of the goals of discourse analysis is to "understand how people use language to create and enact identities and activities" (Shanthi et al., 2015, p. 163). The construction of identities, in particular, was important to me in this project, and discourse analysis allows for that identity construction to be made visible. Shanthi et al. (2015) go on to state, "This paradigm emphasises conductions study in their natural settings by attempting to make sense of, or interpret the meanings people bring to them by searching for patterns embedded in the data source itself" (p. 160), with data, in this case, being in the form of informal interviews and written text produced. Through informal "interview" sessions, I was able to "access various stories or narratives through which people describe their worlds" (Silverman, 2000, p. 823). Through the act of coding and categorizing conversations and written text into categories and themes, a picture of what the first gen experience was like for my students began to emerge.

Part III: The Process

Recruiting and Scheduling

There are several different ways that I recruit students to work with. One way is to simply ask for volunteers in my classes. This is how the project started and how I enlist the majority of my participants. After about two years of photographing my Secondary Education students exclusively, the

Office of Student Affairs caught wind of what I was doing and asked if I wouldn't mind photographing some of their student employees who were first gen as well. I jumped at this opportunity to broaden the scope of the students with whom I worked and enjoyed getting to know students outside of the College of Education.

The next step in the process involves the hard work of coordinating schedules. Since I shoot primarily outdoors, using natural light, the weather always plays a factor. Most photo shoots happen either in the fall or in the spring, but even then everyone must remain flexible. Then there is the trick of working around the students' school and work schedules, meaning that many shoots happen in the evenings or on weekends. Communication about scheduling happens primarily through texting, as students are often reluctant to use email.

Scouting a Location

After a shoot day and time has been established, it is time to start thinking about location. This is one of my favorite parts, as it is fun for me to work with students to consider all of the possibilities. WWU sits on a beautiful forested campus high above the northern end of the Puget Sound. Snow-capped mountains, islands, and ocean views abound. The city of Bellingham also has its quirky charms, as it was once home to lumber and canning industries, leaving behind brick buildings and iron structures that lend themselves nicely to urban landscape photography. Bellingham is also home to several large-scale public art projects, many of which are colorful, whimsical, and very photogenic.

Oftentimes, students will choose a location on campus that is important to them, perhaps in front of a building where their major is housed, or a special cultural or academic center, or perhaps a special tree. The library is often chosen for what it represents in terms of learning. The fountain located in our main square is also a popular choice. But just as often, students will choose to head downtown, maybe to a waterfront park or a sculpture that speaks to their academic interest (I am thinking specifically of a young man majoring in aeronautical engineering who posed for his photo shoot atop a sculpture of a rocket ship).

Wherever students decide to go for their shoot, it is important that the choice is theirs. Sometimes, students ask to go to multiple locations and that's fine, too. Many know that someday they will leave this city and want to have memories of multiple places that were special to them. As a

photographer, I understand the importance of place and how places can recall memories of times long past. The places students choose typically end up as secondary characters in their photo stories, working to complete the picture of the students' identities.

Selecting a Wardrobe

Of all of the elements that students consider when constructing their identities for their photos, none are quite as important as their wardrobe. Since critical literacy invites us to consider clothing as text, I give students complete freedom to wear what they like. Students will often ask me during the planning phase what they *should* wear and I always tell them to wear whatever they want! Students are pleased to hear this, and over the years have chosen to arrive on location wearing everything from t-shirts and tank tops to formal evening gowns and everything in between. Most students choose to wear what makes them most comfortable. Many students enjoy bringing a variety of accessories such as jewelry, scarves, and sweaters that they can change in and out of as the shoot progresses. On occasion, full-on wardrobe changes occur. Once, I had a student bring a small Bluetooth speaker to his shoot so he could play music as he was posing! This same student also live-Tweeted the entire event, which was certainly a first for me.

Part of providing students the agency to write their own scripts is what I want to accomplish with this project. By valuing students' concepts of what helps to create their identity, they feel safe to express themselves in ways in which they might not otherwise. Sometimes I do suggest that they wear something suitable for a family portrait, especially if the photo shoot happens close to Mother's Day weekend, and students consider giving their mothers copies of the photos as gifts. But what students ultimately decide to wear is their choice.

On occasion, students will bring props with them to their photo shoots. One student who was an avid tap dancer brought her tap shoes with her, and we shot her tap dancing in the rain. Another student, a history major, brought a pile of her history books, and we incorporated those into her photo shoot. Sometimes, students even bring extra people to the shoot, including spouses, children, and mentees. There is no limit to how students can individualize their own unique photo shoots.

Snapping and Chatting

There are few things in life as awkward as the first delicate moments of a photo shoot. This is especially true if I do not know the students with whom I am working, but it is true even with students that I do know. There is something incredibly intimate about taking someone's portrait—looking so intently at them through my viewfinder, asking them to pose this way and that. It is also at this time that the inherent power differential between us as students and faculty becomes the most obvious. Those first few poses often look incredibly stiff and staged—so much so that I usually tell students that we're just going to take some test shots to start with. "Don't worry," I tell them. "I'm just adjusting the settings on my camera!" This lets us both get comfortable with one another and for them to establish trust with me that I am going to make them look as good as possible. Humor can be helpful here, and the fact that I often forget to take my lens cap off or turn my camera on signals to students that we all make mistakes! Several students have told me that they have never had their portraits taken before, and so they are nervous and not sure what to do. Others have clearly spent time in front of a camera, evidenced by how they twist and turn comfortably in front of the lens, as if they have a modeling career already behind (or ahead of) them. I need to be attuned to the needs of both.

In order to help students to feel as comfortable as possible during our shoot, I like to talk to them. I like to ask them a lot of questions about a wide range of topics—their families, their interests, what brought them to WWU. It helps that I am a naturally inquisitive person, never one to shy away from asking people to share about themselves. Of course, the depth of our conversations has a lot to do with whether or not the students feel comfortable with me. Throughout each shoot, I am again aware of the power dynamics that are at play, especially if the student is registered in one of my classes. During our shoots, I strive to be on equal footing with the students, stripping away our labels given to us by the university, often allowing the student to lead the session, both in terms of the conversation and in terms of the pacing and design of the shoot.

Oftentimes, our conversations start out by talking about what being a first gen college student means to them. An overwhelming number of students talk to me about the sacrifices that their parents have made in

order to make attending college possible, and this theme comes out in the writing that the students do to accompany their portraits. Some students share with me that they are not only the first in their families to go to college but also the first in their families to be born in the U.S. or that they themselves came to the U.S. at a very young age. I remember one photo shoot where a young man shared with me that his main motivation to do well in his classes was so he could someday give back to his parents—that everything he did in school was for them.

Another pattern that I notice as I photograph first gen students is that many of them plan on continuing their education beyond their four-year degrees. Some of the students are currently enrolled in graduate programs at WWU, but others talk about graduate programs in a variety of fields, everything from aeronautical engineering to social work. To these students, the dream of a college degree doesn't stop at the Bachelor's level, but continues to the Master's or Doctorate level. These conversations are the most fun for me to engage in as a professor, because I can see the passion with which they tell me about their futures—all of their hopes and dreams for what lies ahead. It is usually at this point in their photo shoots that students tend to become more relaxed and really start having fun with the process.

Once students are relaxed, the photos start to take on a more organic and less posed quality. Usually about 20 minutes in, students decide that they are ready to take more risks. Some will decide to try new, "sassier" poses. Some will suggest going to a new location or switch into a new outfit. Some will finally feel comfortable enough to laugh, which allows me to sneak in some candid, unrehearsed shots. These shots typically turn out to be my favorites.

Homework: Writing, Reflecting, Editing, and Sharing

Once the students and I have decided that we have enough material to work with, I assign them their "homework." First, I ask them to think about their written statement that will accompany their photo. I ask them to take a look at what previous students have written and then come up with a short paragraph responding to the prompt: "What does being a first generation college student mean to you?" This often turns out to be more difficult than it might at first seem, as students will sometimes struggle to find just the right words. When they do finally send me their statements, I

do minimal editing, mainly for length according to what will fit best in the frame. It is important to me that their words are their own. As one student told me after his shoot, "Nobody has ever asked me before how I feel being first gen, so I just want to get it right!"

The next thing I ask students to do is to select the file numbers of the photos that they really like and would like me to edit further. This is the point at which *my* homework begins. Before I send students their folder of photos (typically done via Google Drive), I edit *out* all of the ones that are technically imperfect—out of focus, eyes closed, bad composition, and so on. Once the less-than-perfect shots are deleted, I send students somewhere between 25 and 30 of our "best" shots. During a typical shoot, it is not unusual for me to take over 300 photos. I am a fan of just holding the shutter down and letting the camera fire away, capturing whatever it might. Of those 25–30 of the best shots, I ask students to give me their top two or three that they would like me to consider for their "final" portrait. From those finalists, I consider which one has the best composition in which to place their written statement. I then run the final portrait, complete with their written statement Photoshopped in by each student for final approval.

The students are often blown away by how well the final product turns out. I allow them to keep all of the photos they like and encourage them to share them with friends and family. Many of my portraits have been turned into Mother's Day gifts and holiday cards, as well as profile pictures on social media. It's always fun for me as a photographer to see my photos take on lives of their own, off of my hard drive and out in the real world.

Ultimately, I end up printing many of the finished portraits in large format, mounted on foam core, and display them in various locations around campus. First gen photos have also shown up in promotional materials used by the university as well as on websites and in official university publications. For this reason, students always sign release forms before we begin, although the releases are not mandatory. If a student would rather not have their photos shared, I respect that decision. But many students tell me that they would be proud to have their portraits seen by as many people as possible, especially by future first gen students on our campus. Students report to me that they like being mentors, in a sense, to the first gen students who will come after them, letting them know that they are not alone on their university journey.

Part IV: The Themes

When considered as a full collection, many of the same recurring themes emerge from the written statements that the first gen students provide to accompany their portraits. By far the most popular theme is the importance of family, followed closely by how important it is to take advantage of the opportunities that college affords. In the section that follows, I present the themes that occur most frequently throughout the project.

Family

Nearly every student with whom I work mentions in their written statements how important their families are to them. Many even tell me that their families are the reason that they work so hard to do well in school. Mentions of families typically fall into three main categories—how their degrees are dedicated to their parents, the support they received from family, and how much their families (specifically their parents) sacrificed in order for the students to obtain their degrees.

An example of a student dedicating their degree to their parents is Cecelia. An elementary education major, Cecilia not only dedicates her degree to her parents but also mentions their sacrifices that made attending college possible for her. She writes that she wants to make them proud and plans to do that by entering a career for which she has a great deal of passion (Fig. 3.1).

A second example of dedicating their degree to their parents can be seen in the husband/wife team of Talicia and Shelby, who are both human services majors. In their statement, Talicia writes, "When my husband and I receive our diplomas, both as first generation college graduates, it will be because of our parents and grandparents. Generations upon generations of hard work and dedication have paved the way for where we are today" (Fig. 3.2).

The theme of family support is also prevalent in many of the students' personal statements. In fact, I would suggest that this is the theme that I saw most often crop up in students' written statements, often in combination in conjunction with the theme of parental sacrifice. In her statement, Lindsay, a graduate student obtaining her secondary education teaching certificate, states, "I am exceptionally fortunate to have a family that has always supported my educational aspirations. I was always encouraged to pursue my academic interests and career goals on my own terms—with freedom, autonomy and perseverance" (Fig. 3.3).

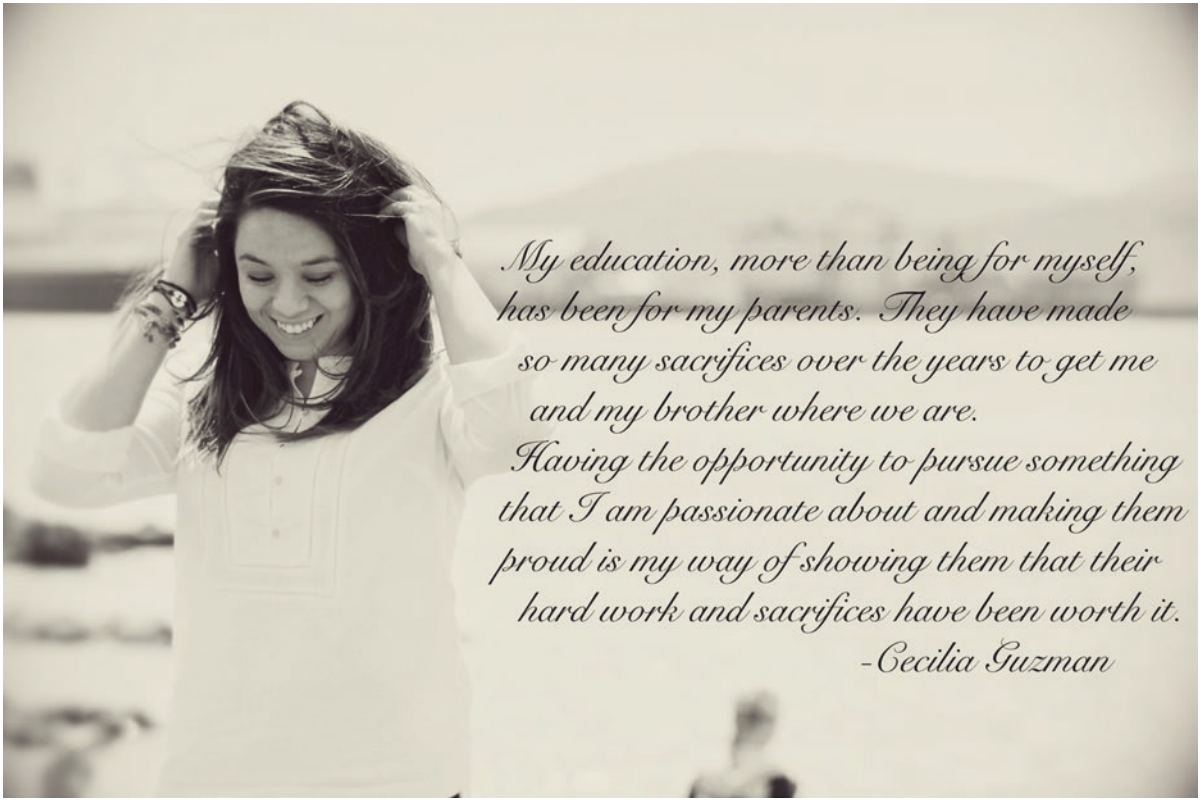

Fig. 3.1 Cecilia Guzman

Fig. 3.2 Talicia and Shelby Miller-Poole

Fig. 3.3 Lindsay Boldrin

Above all, the first gen students with whom I worked identified parental sacrifice as a main contributor to their current success in college. During my time with Irene, she talked a lot about the love that she had for her father and how his sacrifices made it possible for her to attend college. In her statement, she says, "I was granted the opportunity to continue my education at a four-year university because of the sacrifices my father had to make. Without the unconditional love and support from him, I wouldn't have been able to be where I am today. I am a first-generation student and woman of color who plans to give back to my father for all of his sacrifices to get me to Western. Everything I do is for him"(Fig. 3.4)

Emran voiced the same appreciation about the sacrifices that his parents made for him to be able to continue his education. In his words, "No one said that this was ever going to be easy. That was evident in my parents' numerous sacrifices they made for me to be here and to receive a college education—an opportunity they never had." During our time together, Emran also talked a lot about his racial and ethnic roots, and how important it was that he not forget that part of his identity as he worked his way through college and into his career. In his written statement, he says, "But as successful as you can possibly become, I truly believe in the importance of remembering your roots and honoring those who came before you, and to give back to those communities and people who have empowered and motivated you. Never forget where you came from" (Fig. 3.5).

Opportunities

Another theme that came up frequently in both the written statements and my conversation with students was that of opportunity. Many of these students understood that more than anything, their families were providing them with the opportunity to attend college and that was something that they felt both grateful for and obligated to honor. For others, opportunity came through various scholarships. For twins Carlie and Cylie, it was softball scholarships that provided them the opportunity to attend WWU. In their written statement, they focus on the theme of opportunity specifically, stating, "Opportunity. Life is all about the opportunities you are presented. For us, softball gave us a great opportunity to further our education. It was important for us to take advantage of this opportunity, because someone has to be the first person to break the cycle and start a new tradition. Who better than you to be that first person in your family?" (Fig. 3.6).

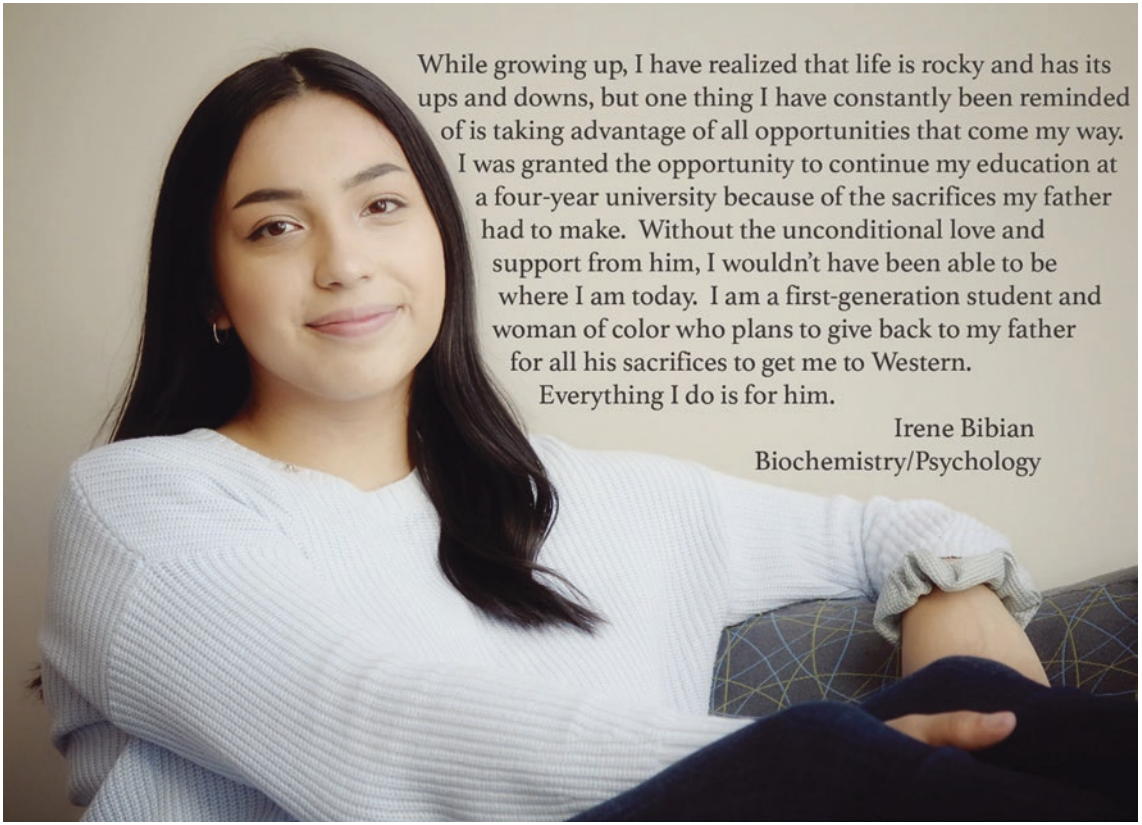

Fig. 3.4 Irene Bibian

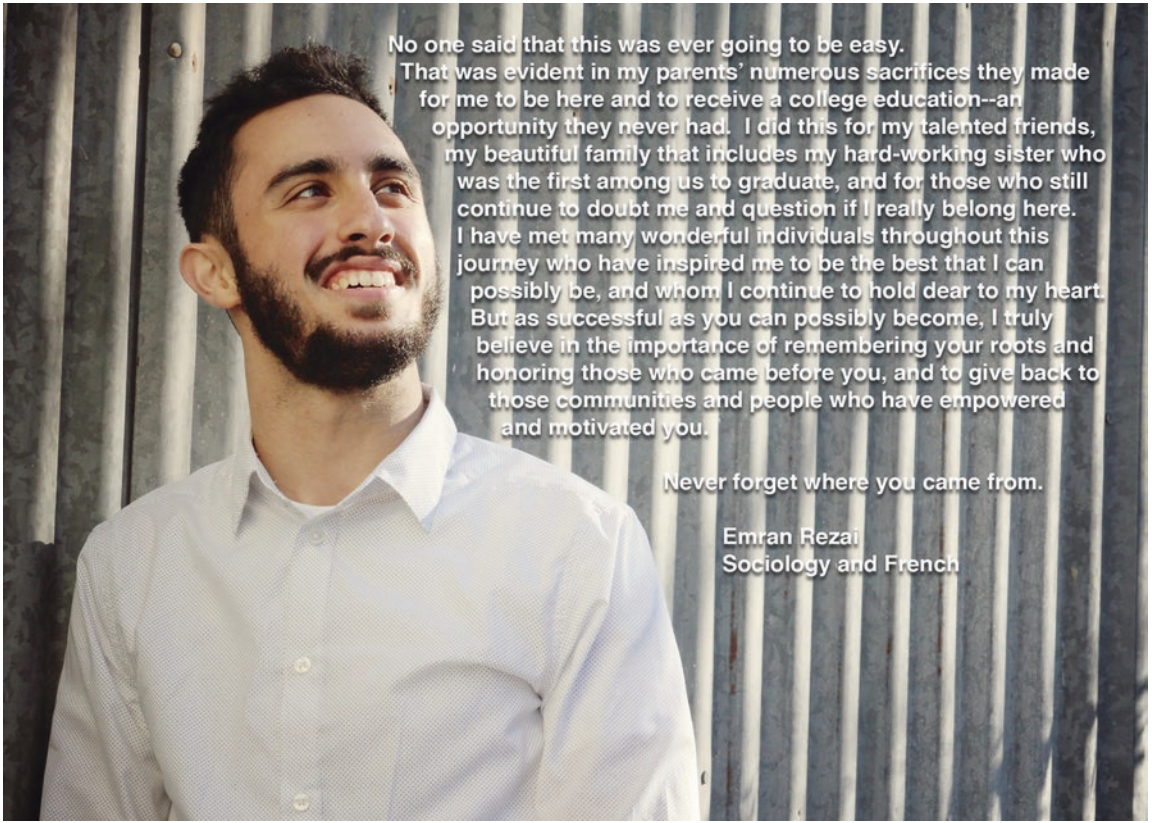

Fig. 3.5 Emran Rezai

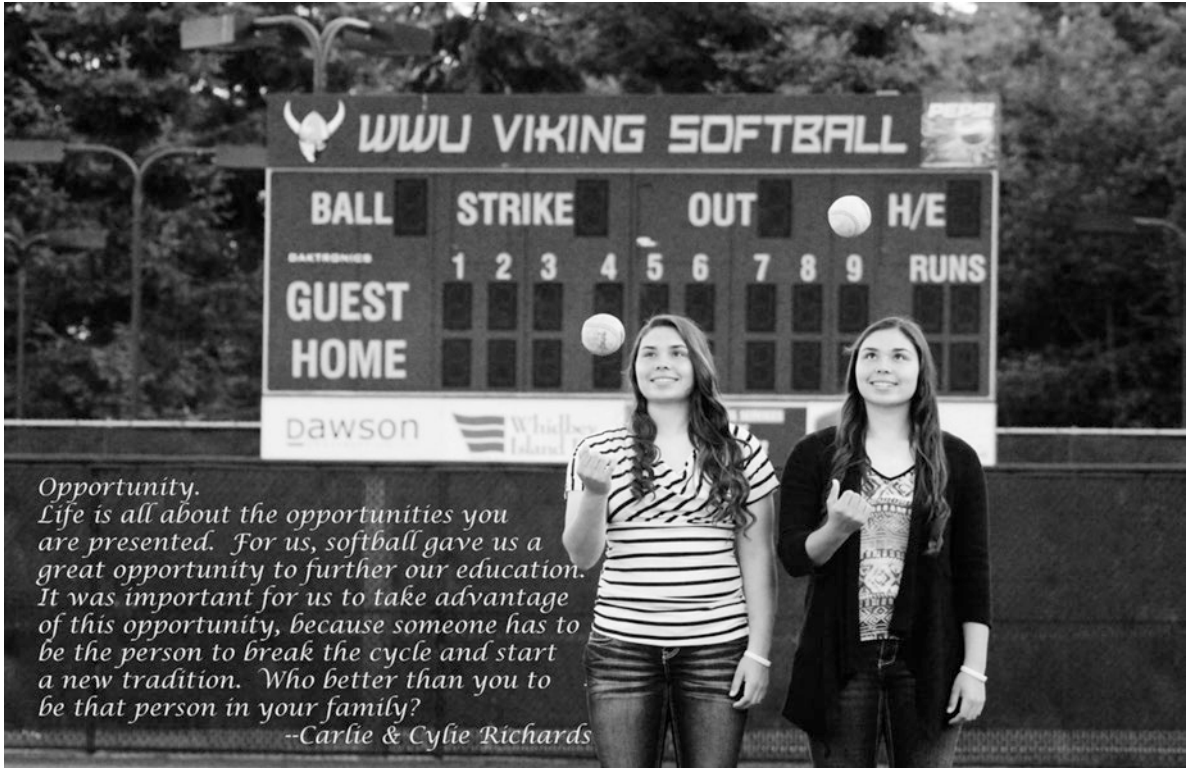

Fig. 3.6 Carlie and Cylie Richards

Irene (see Fig. 3.4) also wrote about the importance of taking advantage of various opportunities that came her way. In her statement, she combines the themes of opportunity and parental sacrifice, stating, "While growing up, I have realized that life is rocky and has its ups and downs, but one thing I have constantly been reminded of is taking advantage of all opportunities that come my way. I was granted the opportunity to continue my education at a four-year university because of the sacrifices my father had to make."

Not Belonging

A theme that several students mentioned, both in their writing and in their conversations with me, was that of either fearing not fitting in at college or experiencing those actual feelings once they arrived. For some, those were feelings that they also felt in high school, and for others, it was unique to their college experience. For Yalda, those feelings of not belonging in school were with her before entering college. In her written statement, she shares:

> *I was always "the other" in my classes growing up, and that did not change in university. Being a first generation woman, I was always forced to prove that I deserve to be here, like my peers, receiving the same education as them, but working twice as hard. Although it's been hard, through making personal connections in the ESC (Ethnic Student Center), I was able to find a community that related to my struggles where we were able to laugh and cry together.*

Yalda follows this statement with a nod to the sacrifice of her parents and then with a statement of her desire to give back to her community upon graduation. "I hope to take everything I have learned from my years in higher education to give back to my community" (Fig. 3.7).

Ana, an elementary education major, was even more adamant in her written statement, directing her words to the naysayers who predicted that she would not succeed in a college setting. "I was always told that I wouldn't be where I am today. Everyone thought that I would end up dropping out of high school. Well, those people were wrong" (Fig. 3.8).

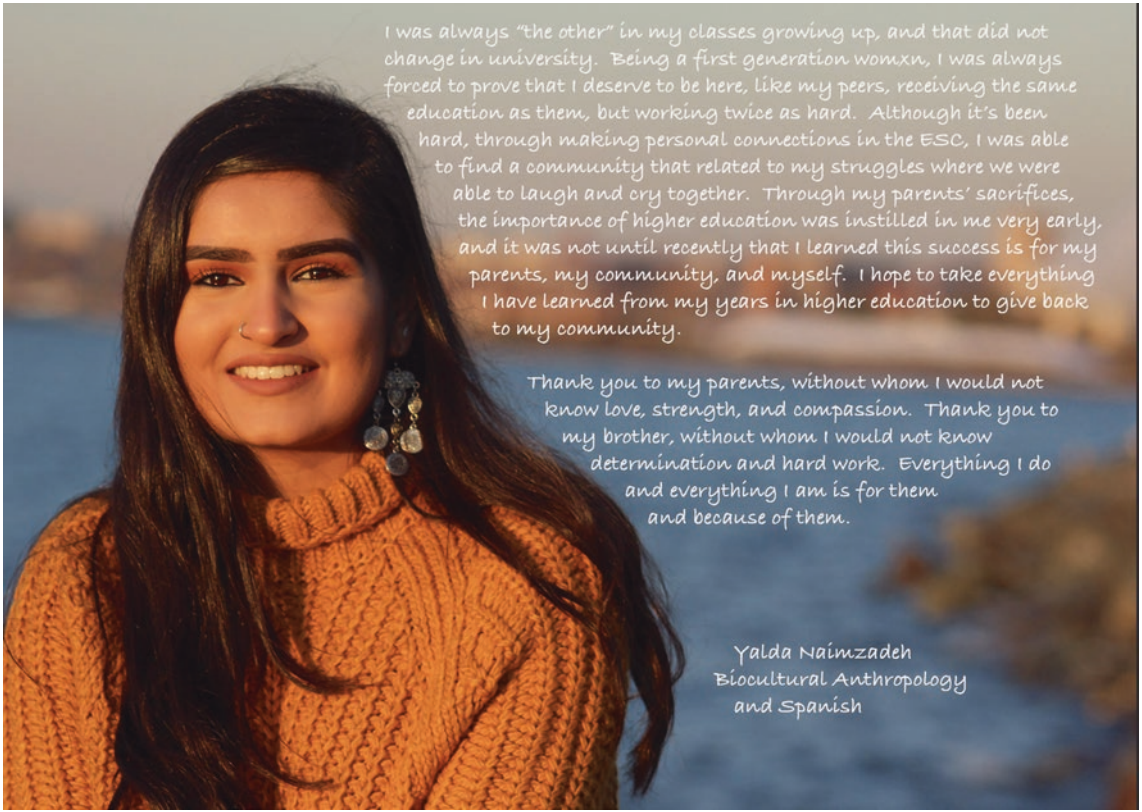

Fig. 3.7 Yalda Naimzadeh

Fig. 3.8 Ana Cervantes

In his written statement, Emran (see Fig. 3.5) makes a brief statement about the theme of not belonging, or rather his abilities being doubted, when he says, "I did this for my talented friends, my beautiful family that includes my hard-working sister who was the first among us to graduate, and for those who still continue to doubt me and question if I really belong here."

Setting an Example for Future First Gen Students

A final theme that was detected in the written statements of the students with whom I worked was that of setting an example for future first gen students to emulate. As we talked, almost all of the students told me that they wished they had more role models as they were coming up through middle and high school. In fact, some asked if their photos would ever be shared with younger students and indeed they have. Whenever I provide photography workshops to K–12 teachers and students, I share portraits of my first gen students and they are always very well-received. Carlos, a student of mine in the Secondary Education department and an amateur weightlifter, wrote on his photo, "As a first generation college student, it is important to me to set an example for my future children and grandchildren to show them what is possible. I feel blessed to have learned the process of filling out college applications, filing my FAFSA, searching for scholarships, and preparing for the SAT's" (Fig. 3.9).

Nancy, a dual biology/psychology major, wrote about how she would like to be a role model not only to her family but to her community as well. "I also feel a sense of responsibility to my Hispanic community to try and set an example to future students that may find themselves in a similar situation." She told me in our conversations that she had few role models growing up of Hispanic women in the sciences and how she would like to become one of those examples for young girls today (Fig. 3.10).

In her written statement, Jaimee, an elementary education major, assumes that her audience is fellow first gen students. To them, she writes, "Where we come from doesn't mandate what we are capable of or the lives we are expected to lead. The only obstacle that stands in our way of gaining knowledge is ourselves." To this end, she wanted a portrait where she was surrounded by children's books, a metaphor for the knowledge she has gained during her time at WWU (Fig. 3.11).

Fig. 3.9 Carlos A. Serrano Castro

Fig. 3.10 Nancy Talavera

Fig. 3.11 Jaimee Alonso

Part V: The Faculty/Staff

Each spring, as part of our graduation ceremonies at WWU, I have large format prints created and displayed at various receptions for families and other faculty across campus to see. After about three years, some faculty and staff began to approach me, asking if I would be willing to work with them to help them tell their stories. This, of course, was a task that I gladly took on. Sometimes, depending on the faculty or staff member, students may not know too much about their background, including the struggles that they may have had to endure to get to where they are in the academy today. It made sense that if faculty and staff would share their experiences as being the first in their families to go to college, it might help to close the gap, especially in terms of power relations, that can form between students and the professionals they interact with each day.

Something that became clear right away was how the faculty and staff themes paralleled the students' themes—themes of parental sacrifice, taking advantage of opportunities, and not always feeling like they belonged. Dr. Karen Dade, Associate Dean of the Woodring College of Education, thanked her parents for supporting her when college was not something everyone in her community could access. In her written statement, she shares, "In coming up, college was not very accessible to those in my community. I thank my parents, who instilled strong education values and the will to achieve despite the odds" (Fig. 3.12).

For Dr. Veronica Velez, Director of the Education for Social Justice Minor at WWU, refusing to be an exception was evident in her writing, stating, "As a first generation college student, I refused to be the exception, the 'only' in my classes, my cohort, my program. I refused to accept the terms higher education had set for defining opportunity, educational or otherwise" (Fig. 3.13).

For Dr. Victor Nolet, Professor of Secondary Education, parts of college felt mysterious to him because he had nobody in his family who had ever experienced it. In his statement, he writes, "[W]hen I got to college, I figured that everyone else had some kind of book that told them how to understand all the mysterious code words and complicated systems and social norms associated with college. … I'm truly grateful that there were so many generous and kind people along the way who helped me get by without that secret book!" (Fig. 3.14).

Dr. Francisco Rios, Dean of the Woodring College of Education, shared in his written statement how his success at college was important for his sense of familial identity (Fig. 3.15):

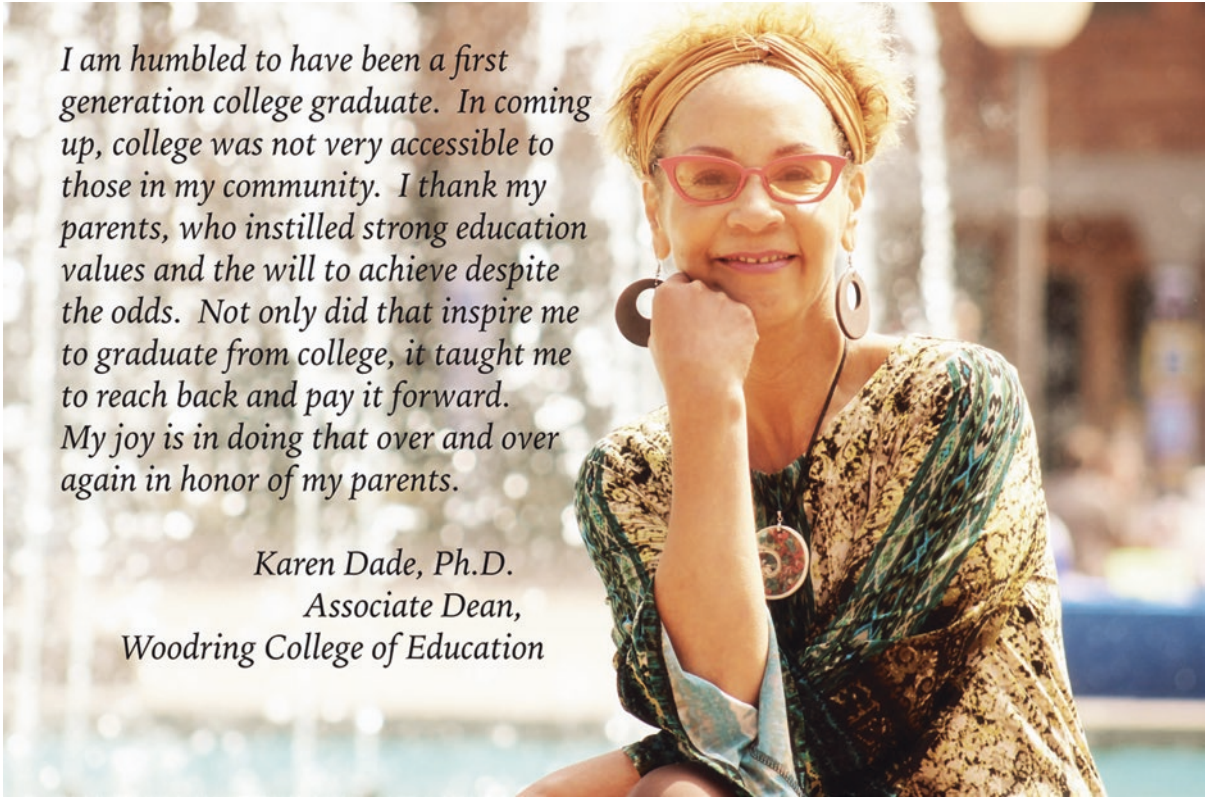

Fig. 3.12 Dr. Karen Dade

Fig. 3.13 Dr. Veronica N. Velez

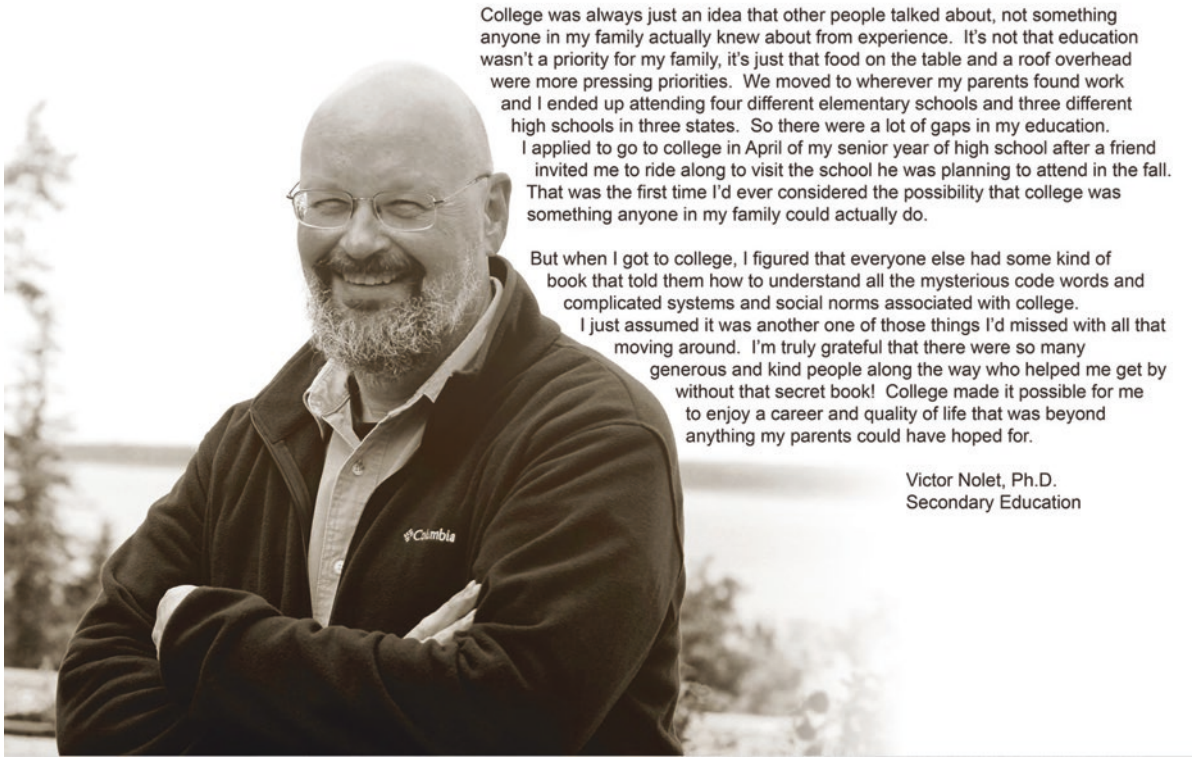

Fig. 3.14 Dr. Victor Nolet

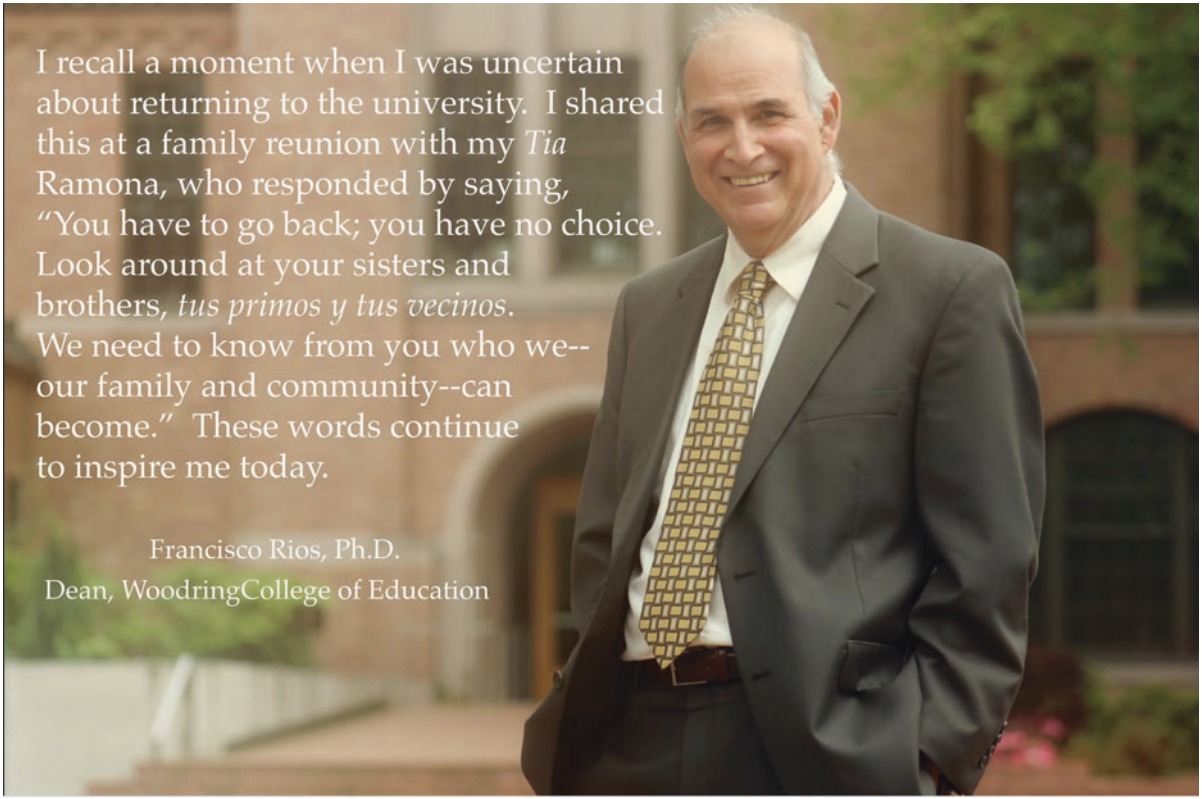

Fig. 3.15 Dr. Francisco Rios

I recall a moment when I was uncertain about returning to the university. I shared this at a family reunion with my Tia Ramona, who responded by saying, "You have to go back; you have no choice. Look around you at your sisters and brothers, tus primos y tus vecinos. We need to know from you who we—our family and community—can become." Those words continue to inspire me today.

Today, you can find large format photos of WWU students and faculty and staff hanging side-by-side, throughout campus. By being highly visible, the university is making a statement that declares, "We value our first generation students!"

Part VI: The Questionnaires (Reflection)

After I deliver the finished portraits along with the associated text to students, I ask them to answer a few questions via a questionnaire. I don't always get these returned, as it is usually at the end of the academic term by this point and time is limited. However, some do find the time and energy to return them, and I am always appreciative for what they tell me after having a bit of time to reflect.

One question I ask is how they felt when I initially reached out to them to be a part of this project. Overwhelmingly students say that they felt excited. They felt excited to share their experiences and tell their stories. One student responded that they felt honored, to not only participate but to be a role model, so that other students could see "a familiar face" hanging on the wall and maybe not feel so alone.

A related question that I ask is what made them say yes? As I mentioned earlier, some students know me from class, but many do not, and being photographed by a stranger can be awkward, to say the least. Some students said that when they saw pictures of their friends, they wanted to say yes also. The majority of students, however, said they said yes because they wanted to share their experience with others. One student told me during our photo shoot that nobody had ever asked him what his experience was like, being a first gen student. He told me that he said yes because I was the first person to ask.

When asked what the term "first gen" meant to them personally, students had mixed responses. Some told me that it meant being able to represent their families in an academic way, as one student said, "[P]utting my family on the academic map." Others told me that being first gen meant sacrifice, mainly on the part of their parents. Some took a broader

interpretation of the phrase, saying that it represented the first in their families to migrate to a new country. Yet others defined first gen in terms of opportunity, specifically "having the opportunity to be the first in my family to have the opportunity of a higher education." On occasion, students would tell me that the term "first gen" sometimes had a negative connotation, meaning that others might perceive their parents as not valuing their education, or that their parents themselves were "uneducated." This reminded me of how oftentimes the funds of knowledge that our students bring with them to college are undervalued and this is not lost on our students.

When asked about how they felt during the photo shoot itself, one student said, "I felt like a star! I've never had formal portraits taken of myself before, so I felt so special. I even wore special earrings that my mother gave to me as a gift." Another student said that although she felt shy at first, she quickly grew more comfortable, especially since, in her words, "You gave me the power to make all of the decisions in how I wanted to represent myself."

A final question that I asked all of my participants was how their families reacted to seeing their final portraits. One student reported, "They absolutely LOVED it! They especially liked what I wrote. It made my mom cry!" Another student told me something similar, that her parents were "especially touched by my personal statement." As a portrait photographer, especially of families, I take crying moms as the highest compliment.

Being involved in this long-term photography project has given so much depth and meaning to my work, not only as a part-time photographer but also as a full-time faculty member. One concept that we impart to future teachers in my department is the importance of relationships in education. Relational teaching is the foundation upon which all else is built and we cannot build relationships with our students unless we make an effort to get to know them. By asking students questions about their backgrounds, I am breaking down barriers that could impede their learning. By letting my students teach me, I am learning so much. I will always remember what one student wrote to me on their exit questionnaire. When asked how it felt for them to put themselves "out there" as a role model for future first gen students, they wrote, "It feels so good to have my story laid out for folks to read and appreciate—like having people know about me and what I had to go through feels really good. I hope it can motivate others to succeed."

References

Ewald, W. (2001). *I wanna take me a picture: Teaching photography and writing to children*. Beacon Press.

Freire, P., & Macedo, D. (1987). *Literacy: Reading the word and reading the world*. Bergin & Garvey.

Hobbs, R. (2021). *Media literacy in action*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Janks, H. (2010). *Literacy and power*. Routledge.

Luke, A., & Freebody, P. (1999). Further notes on the four resources model. *Reading Online*. Retrieved February 12, 2006, from http://www.readingonline.org/research/lukefreebody.html

Marquez, K., & Rios-Aguilar, C. (2018). *Funds of knowledge in higher education: Honoring students' cultural experiences and resources as strengths*. Taylor & Francis/Routledge.

Shanthi, A., Lee, K. W., & Lajium, D. (2015). Discourse analysis as a qualitative approach to study information sharing practice in Malaysian board forums. *International Journal on E-learning Practices, 2*.

Silverman, D. (2000). Analyzing talk and text. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Sage.

Szarkowski, J. (1966). *The photographer's eye*. Doubleday.

Vélez-Ibáñez, C. G., & Greenberg, J. B. (1992). Formation and transformation of funds of knowledge among U.S. Mexican households. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly, 23*(4), 313–335.