

Higher Ed Rewired

Season 2, Episode 5

Fostering a Sense of Belonging for First Generation Students

Host: Annet Rangel

Guests: Amelia Parnell, Anthony Abraham Jack, Ana Ramos, Ji Yun Son and Sara Whitley

For many students, navigating the college experience is unfamiliar and may sometimes feel alienating. Many institutions don't operate much differently than they did 400 years ago, despite the student body being dramatically more diverse than it was back then. College campuses are beginning to transform to support students with their diversity of backgrounds and experiences. Higher Ed Rewired asks Anthony Jack of Harvard Graduate School of Education, Sara Whitley of the NASPA Center for First-generation Student Success, and Ji Son of California State University, Los Angeles, "Why is a sense of belonging important to student success for first gen students?"

Anthony Abraham Jack, Assistant Professor of Education, Harvard Graduate School of Education, Shutzer Assistant Professor, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, and author of *The Privileged Poor: How Elite Colleges Are Failing Disadvantaged Students*.

Ji Yun Son, Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology, California State University, Los Angeles

Ana Ramos, Graduate Student, CSULA Learning Lab, California State University, Los Angeles

Sara Whitley, Assistant Vice President, Center for First-generation Student Success, NASPA – Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education

[Campus sounds, students talking, orientation, fade under...]

Ana Ramos: You feel like a little puppy because you're so tiny. There's this big school. There's a lot of students. There's a lot of competition. And you made it.

Annet Rangel: This is Ana Ramos. She's currently a psychology graduate student at California State University, Los Angeles.

Her research was inspired by her own experience in undergrad and focuses on how to help *all* students thrive in a university setting...

Ana: I kind of kept doing what I did in high school, and it wasn't until later on that I realized, oh, I think I've been doing it wrong. But no one to tell me that I was doing it wrong. So I think it had to do a lot with just looking, watching for, like, the first year, seeing what everyone was doing, especially those students who were older than me. Asking them, what are you doing? But even then, some of them were first generation as well. They were kind of just going with the flow like I was.

Annet Rangel: Okay, so imagine this...

<Sound effect>

It's your last year of high school and after months of stressing over deadlines, meeting requirements and jumping over endless hoops...

You finally received your college acceptance letter.

You feel elated and relieved.

But most of all, you feel like a pioneer. No one in your family has ever attended college.

<Beat>

But on your first day, you're inundated with new information. Jargon, policies, deposits, registration deadlines...all before your financial aid has even kicked in.

By the end of the day your head is spinning.

Getting into college always felt like you finally won the race...But now, it's beginning to look a lot more like a *starting line*.

Anna Ramos: I don't think that there was a transition point that was very smooth. It was more like, here's high school. Now. I made it to college. Now what. What I do would I go to. Who's gonna help me and what am I supposed to do?

Annet Rangel: For centuries, colleges and universities have operated through an established set of standards ... and assumed students would just get it.

Higher ed even has its own language ... words and phrases like syllabus, office hours, units, work study...students are bombarded with acronyms and terminology that feels foreign...

And if students like Ana would not succeed...their failures would be met with apathy...colleges and universities basically were saying, "Oh well. That's their fault."

But then, *data* told an important story about first generation college students:

though they make up a full third of the student body, only a quarter of them graduate in four years...

That's about 20 percent less than the national average...

This one, shocking statistic has led to a perspective flip: what if it's not the student's fault they're failing?

What if it's the shortcomings of the system?

[THEME MUSIC STARTS]

Higher Ed Rewired is a production of the California State University. The largest, most diverse four-year public university system in the country and an engine of social and economic mobility. Each episode examines groundbreaking research and exciting innovations taking place across the nation that are transforming the pathways for student success.

Annet Rangel: Welcome to Higher Ed Rewired, I'm Annet Rangel, your host for season 2.

Today, we're talking about belonging...the human emotional need to feel accepted and included...

At this moment, the U.S. is the most diverse it's ever been...and that's reflected in the "traditional" college-aged students enrolling in 4-year institutions...

Among the influx, those who identify as first-generation.

So now, colleges are faced with the task of helping students— from all backgrounds and experiences — understand that their place on campus isn't a fluke...

They deserve to be there and *can* succeed.

But in order to do that, they have to rethink how they have operated for generations... to meet the needs and demands of low-income and first-generation students.

[MUSIC RINGS OUT]

Dr. Anthony Jack: When students enter college, whether they're into a community college or an Ivy League institution, they encounter a hidden curriculum. That system of unwritten rules and unsaid expectations.

Annet Rangel: This is Dr. Anthony Jack. Assistant Professor at Harvard Graduate School of Education and Author of "The Privileged Poor: How Elite Colleges Are Failing Disadvantaged Students".

Dr. Jack: This permeates all of higher education for students who have never been on a college campus or whose families had never been on a college campus, everything is at that point new.

Annet: Right. Right. Absolutely. Where do you think those feelings of alienation also inevitably came from?

Dr. Jack: You are entering a new world with new language, new customs, new rules that not only in the... here's the bad part where people don't expect you just to know them. They expect you to have already mastered them by the time you set foot on campus. My favorite example and use it in and documented this is office hours. In all my travels, I still have met fewer than 20 faculty who have defined office hours on their syllabus or in their classrooms. We always say when office hours are, we almost never say what they are.

<MUSIC STARTS AND PLAYS UNDER THE REST OF DR. JACK'S SECTION>

Dr. Jack: And so that's what I mean by getting in is only half the battle, because the moment that you get in. You have oftentimes exceeded the expectations of your family, right? You have done what they've always wanted, but have no way of imagining what's next so they can't prepare you for what's next. And then you have a school who's not yet ready for you either. And you yourself are, are somewhere in between, you're excited, you're scared.

You are prepared, but not yet ready. So all of these things are happening to us at once. And those are only the social hurdles that students are, are forced to grapple with.

Annet Rangel: Dr. Jack shines a light on a silent struggle many students contend with during a key transition period from high school to college.

So why is it crucial to make each student feel like they belong?

Dr. Jack: It is more than just a feeling that graduate students and undergraduates need to feel they belong, it's what it's attached to. If you feel like you belong to or belong in a community, you are more likely to use the resources that that community has. You are more likely to go to mental health services, career services. You are more likely to use the libraries. You are more likely to use every aspect of the university. That then helps aid your mobility. Sense of belonging is related to not only better grades, but greater mental health.

And so, sense of belonging is not just about it's not just about my just feeling good. It's about feeling that you have some sort of ownership or entitlement to the resources in that particular place, whether it be other people, whether it be certain offices, whether it be using it for the cachet of the name, but using all the resources at a place.

<MUSIC PLAYS FOR A BIT THEN RINGS OUT>

Ana: The first year is the rockiest. But I do think that because there is a disconnect, I think my second year was really where I started struggling because I had to work.

Annet Rangel: This is Ana Ramos again. You heard her at the top of the episode.

Ana: I think a lot of people who come out of my community, it's like you're giving the first year to kind of take a break from you don't have to work. Don't worry about that. We're going to be here. We're gonna support you.

But then after the first year, it's like, that's it. You had a year to transition. Now you have to figure it out.

Annet Rangel: Following her first year of college, Ana's family expected her to pick up a job.

Ana was afraid that, like her older sister, the pressure and demands of having a job and going to school would eventually cause her to drop-out of undergrad.

But even as a full-time student with an off-campus job, Ana earned a research opportunity on campus and took it... adding to her already busy schedule.

Ana Ramos: it was second year I joined the lab because I had good grades. You know, they reached out to me and they told me to join the lab. But even then, I didn't feel, that I knew what I wanted to do, or what I was doing. I was there. I think it was just kind of the imposter syndrome, like, oh, my goodness. They're gonna figure me out. I'm not supposed to be in this laboratory.

Annet Rangel: Although Ana was specifically recruited by her professors to join not one, but two research labs...she wrestled with feelings of inadequacy.

But despite her self-doubt...Ana's lab work and determination would eventually lead to a shift in the way she perceived herself in academia.

<HOPEFUL MUSIC STARTS UP AND PLAYS UNDER THROUGHOUT>

Ana Ramos: It wasn't really into the third year that I entered this program for minority students. That was a turning point where, I finally felt like those people who understood my experience, who could tell me where to go, who told me about these resources, Yes, they tell us these are the resources you have, use them, etc. But it's not the same as someone who says, look, this is kind of what the benefit is. I'll go with you. I'll be your support system, you know. Let's do this together because we're going through the same things.

Annet Rangel: Through her lab work, Ana was able to find and connect with students whose experiences were similar to hers.

She came to realize what she was feeling was actually, pretty common amongst first generation students...

For the first time since she started college...Ana found her support system.

<MUSIC RINGS OUT>

SARAH: Structural inequalities are the thing that is holding first generation students back from being successful in so many ways.

Annet Rangel: This is Dr. Sarah Whitley, vice president of the Center for First-Generation Student Success at the National Association of Student Personnel, or, NASPA.

Dr. Whitley and her team work with colleges and universities to develop tools and programs that help advance the success of first-generation and low-income students.

Half the battle in her research is nailing down who qualifies as a first-generation student... and why that's important to define.

SARAH: Right now, the Center does not put forth a formal definition, and the reason is because we work with institutions to determine what's the best definition for them, for the institution, for a lot of our internal research. We're working with partners who have identified and it's often neither parent or guardian who have graduated with a four-year college degree.

ANNETTE: So what structural inequalities existed that hindered students from achieving that kind of success at every level?

SARAH: There are a lot of really, really big things that are enormous roadblocks within the first-generation space within institutions. First being the lack of a clear understanding of the definition. How is an institution a defining first-gen? And there's two parts to that conversation. There's the institutional definition side, but also the conveying of that information to an incoming student.

Annet Rangel: According to NASPA, first generation students make up about a third of all college students. But only 27 percent will attain their degrees within four years. That's in comparison to their peers who graduate at 44 percent in four years.

SARAH: We often know that first-gen work is limited by the intersectional identity. So more often than not, first gen programs are siloed in the multicultural offices when they're, they should be there. Don't get me wrong, they should be there. But they should be a whole lot of other places, too.

ANNETTE: You're very much doing this on a national scale. And so what are some national trends that you are seeing when it comes to challenges that first gen students are facing?

SARAH: Yeah, we work with institutions all over the country every day of every institutional type. And so it's a really you know, and it's interesting, you go some places and the problems and challenges are dramatically different, but there's always this threat of the same ones everywhere, you know, things like navigating the hidden curriculum. Every institution is so overwhelmed with jargon and policy and procedural issues that make just make it really, really challenging. You know, it's like in higher ed, we use a different language and we expect people to know what a provost is and a bursar, and that you have to add or drop a class before you can get another class and you have to meet satisfactory academic. But what does that mean? What are all these words? And so we we set-up this this environment, as you said earlier, for different people. These are not the people who are going to college now and expecting people to conform. So, I think as we think about national trends right now,

SARAH: How do we scale programmatic effort so that everyone has access to them? And that's hard. That's hard work to do in a place that's super siloed and bureaucratic. But that's something that I think we're seeing institutions working towards to meet this challenge that they're seeing with their students of not being able to navigate the systems and structures, students not getting services, students leaving the institution because they can't figure it out. And it's a challenge. We also continue to see the academic space being a challenge. Students not feeling comfortable in the classroom, not wanting to connect with faculty and really faculty, starting to say, oh, I'm First-Gen. Maybe, I should think more about what that means in my classroom and in the environment or creating it.

MONTAGE OF DR. SON'S STUDENT TESTIMONY VIDEOS

Student 1: I was so scared that...I was so scared to even share that I'm scared. So what happened at one point I was like, I need to start talking to other people about this.

Student 2: The goal is to expose you to all this information, whether it's related to your major or not, so that you're prepared for life.

Student 3: As a college student here at Cal State LA, the advice I give to all the incoming students is um to not be afraid of this transition, you're not the only one experiencing it. >

Dr. Son: One of the things we've produced is a set of video materials, really getting students to say what their experience has been like, what has been helpful for them.

Annet Rangel: This is Dr. Ji Son. She heads the Learning Lab at California State University, Los Angeles.

At the Learning Lab, Dr. Son advises students to find innovative approaches to foster development and inclusion for all types of learners.

Through a series of videos, the lab has produced tools to help guide new students as they transition into college.

Dr. Son: students telling other students is probably the most powerful thing we have more than a teacher.

If I said, hey, you should study like this, it's like, who knows why I'm saying it? Right. But if a student says, hey I went through exactly what you went through, it feels a little bit more like their experiences have weight. And so we've had students engage with us in producing these videos that really show us a little slice of the Cal State L.A. student's life. And we've woven together a couple of different students' life stories in order to help students see the things that they go through, getting stuck in traffic and being late for class, feeling like I don't know what I should be this major. Is this really going to lead to a job? I have no idea. Feeling a little bit like rejected if a professor just didn't think that a paper of yours was great. Right. Like all of those experiences are experiences that countless Cal State L.A. students have had.

Annet Rangel: These tools are presented to students through an “Intro to Higher Education” course...

And they aren't just your typical “oh...welcome to college” orientation videos.

...they showcase students sharing their insecurities, concerns and vulnerabilities...and normalizing them

Dr. Son: And so to really unlock that whole kind of kind of perspective, looking at Cal State, L.A. as like, wow, this is a place where somebody like me has come before and there are resources for people just like me.

Annet: What I really love about these findings is that there seems to be really tangible things that students themselves can do and faculties and administrations can begin to change on their campus in order to foster a sense of belonging for students feel like they do belong.

Dr. Son: Yeah. You know, and we're really interested in how to help more faculty members do that in a way that makes sense on our campus. Right. Because the things that impact student's sense of belonging on campus might be a little bit different than some other campus. And so what we've really done is delved into the experiences of students, ask them what are the moments where they felt like? I'm not sure I belong, where they've questioned that and that we've created materials like videos and exercises and class activities, discussion questions

where students could actually talk and disclose the moments that feel kind of shaky to them. These are the moments where they really question their own belonging. And we could actually have that conversation so that other students who are watching could think, oh, my God, it's like you're reading my mind. I actually thought that, too.

Annet: Yes, I love that you said that because I feel like that that really is one of the major outcomes of this, right? It's like just the simple fact as a student knowing, like, you are not crazy for not understanding what's going on around you.

Dr. Son: You know, in some ways it's like the dominant Western culture, like the dominant Western culture in academia is, oh, you're supposed to just raise your hand and just say with confidence, like when you disagree with the speaker. But that is weird. Like almost no other culture thinks that's OK.

Annet: I love researchers so much, yes, this is so good. It is weird. It is really.

Dr. Son: Yeah. It's a real outlier.

But then many of our students who may come from more collectivist backgrounds, who may come from more hierarchical family structures, like, their kind of their being expected to just go out there and be like, oh, professor, who has a PhD, I kinda disagree with you. Let me let me explain to you why. And that's just not natural.

Annet: No, no, it's not.

Dr. Son: But if we as professors could say, oh, here are the times when I was expected to do that and I felt real weird about it, then students learn two things: they learn that that is the expectation of the culture, but they also learn even people who play that game. They feel weird, too and feeling awkward is part of it, and it's not a sign that you don't belong. Feeling awkward is part of the process.

Annet: Absolutely. And again, I just like, yeah, I wish I wish more professors, more administrators would just talk about that even. So are there things on the infrastructural level of higher education that you think work against professors being able to have these kinds of candid conversations or the ability for them to give these resources to their students who feel like they don't belong on campus?

Dr. Son: One of the things about academia is there are certain metrics that are valued, things like how many publications do you have, how much grant money have you brought in?

<MUSIC STARTS SOFTLY>

Dr. Son: And some of these metrics it values work, like how much work did you do? Right. And sometimes I think people don't think of this human relational

capital as contributing a lot to that work. And I think part of it, part of the job we have in academia is telling better stories about how important those human relationships are, things like belonging, things like social capital, how important those things are to producing high quality work, because in truth, we all want things to work better.

And so if we're trying to give students a really impactful learning experience and change them into people who are curious and thoughtful and engaged in learning, even outside of the university infrastructure, then what are the experiences we want to give to them?

<MUSIC COMES UP, RINGS OUT>

Ana Ramos, is one of the learning lab research assistants....her time at the lab and under the guidance of Dr. Son helped shape her sense of belonging....

And sparked a desire to pay it forward

Ana: I think one of the biggest things I learned was my degree was not only for me, but for everyone around me.

Annet Rangel: It's people like Ana who are helping create an environment where every student feels validated in their experiences.

And it took Ana over two years to feel comfortable and confident as a college-student... but once she did, she was able to thrive.

Ana: I always like to say, I'm really busy, but I'm never too busy to mentor someone.

Ana: I want to be just a great mentor and be able to use my time for that. So even right now, like, it's like I feel like it's my job. I feel like in a way, too, it's I'm helping my younger self in some way where it's like if that was me, if that were my siblings who are younger than me, I want someone to help them.

Annet Rangel: But that responsibility doesn't just fall on Ana.

Faculty, staff and administrators need to do their part to create a community where every student feels like they belong.

<THEME MUSIC STARTS UP>

Institutions need to work toward making every student know they matter...

Higher Ed Rewired is a production of the California State University Office of the Chancellor as part of the CSU's Graduation Initiative 2025. This podcast is made possible in part by the support of the College Futures Foundation; more graduates for a thriving California. Learn more at CollegeFutures.org. To hear

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[THEME MUSIC RINGS OUT]