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# EDUCATION

## Challenges of a first-generation student

Settling in at college a difficult adjustment

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**KUTZTOWN, Pennsylvania (AP) -** - On the third Sunday in August, Victor Nivar did something no one in his family had ever done before: He left home to pursue a college degree.



Victor Nivar walks back to his dormitory room after class at Kutztown University in Kutztown, Pennsylvania.

Vowing that her son's departure would be free of tears, Priscila Martinez hugged and kissed him at the door, told him she loved him, and reminded him to drive carefully on the 45-minute trip from the family home in Bethlehem to Kutztown University in southeastern Pennsylvania.

Priscila waited for Victor's 1993 Mercury Cougar to disappear around the corner.

Then she wept.

More than anyone, Victor's mother knew that the quiet 18-year-old who settled into Room 221 of Rothermel Hall later that day had already absorbed a lifetime's worth of tough lessons, none more difficult than the stabbing death of his father in the Bronx seven years ago.

Following the slaying -- a sidewalk attack witnessed by the whole family -- Priscila moved her children to Bethlehem, where Victor helped raise his three younger siblings.

Now, facing the rigors of college classes, homesickness and life on campus 40 miles and a universe away from his gritty neighborhood, Victor is being tested in completely new ways.

"He knows he's going to have to dig deep to make it," said Billy Staples, the Bethlehem middle school teacher who, along with Priscila, helped Victor believe a college education was within his grasp.

### Financial worries

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So far, observers say, Victor's experience fits in with the lifestyle patterns and problems of first-generation college students generally.

Like many of his first-to-college peers, Victor comes from a low-income family, and financial worries are still a big concern to him. He's also finding the transition to the classroom tough, but perhaps even more difficult is the social scene.

Straddling two worlds -- college and home -- Victor's mind is in one place. And his heart clearly in another.

"I feel like I belong in Bethlehem, but I feel like I need to be here," he said recently in the dormitory room he shares with Danny Hernandez, his best friend since middle school.

Carlos Ojeda, a Kutztown business professor and former admissions officer, said Victor's balancing act goes beyond enrollment in a university that already has a reputation as a "suitcase school" -- a college where the majority of students go home each weekend.

The pull of the family prompts many first-generation minority students to choose colleges close to familiar surroundings, said Ojeda, who convinced Victor to attend Kutztown.

"When a first generation goes to school there is pressure from the family, but there is a certain amount of guilt that comes with it, too," said Ojeda, who was the first in his family to attend college.

"It's usually subconscious and it's not very open. But you feel guilty because you're not home working and donating to the family."

### Balancing act

Jacqueline King, the director of federal policy analysis for the American Council on Education, said guilt helps to explain why visits home often cause friction between first-generation students and families.

"The notion of a kid moving away is tough as it is," she said. "And then the idea that, when you do come home, you'll be spending time doing homework that you could be spending with your family causes problems."

Victor tries, but rarely succeeds, to divide his weekends into equal visits with family and friends.

His younger brothers and sister -- also part of their mother's unrelenting campaign to see each of her children graduate from college -- can handle Victor's absence.

The kids at the neighborhood Boys and Girls Club, however, have a difficult time understanding why the longtime fixture at the club -- a veteran volunteer, paid summer lifeguard and all-around friend -- doesn't hang around much anymore and leaves every Sunday.

To a point, sharing a room with Danny has helped Victor adjust to campus life.



**Danny Hernandez, the first member of his family to attend college, rests before a class.**

"We do everything together," said Danny, also a first-generation student. "We're here for each other."

That bond, however, also has hampered the initiation into college life for both young men.

During the first weeks of class, for instance, Danny and Victor rarely spoke to anyone except other graduates of Bethlehem's Liberty High School attending Kutztown.

Even as their circle has gradually broadened to include other students they met in class, Victor and Danny -- both shy and intense -- have mostly stayed to themselves.

### Small world



**Victor Nivar studies in composition class.**

One day, Victor turned away embarrassed when a classmate in his psychology lecture hall flirtatiously asked why he'd ignored her e-mailed invitation to a campus party.

"Right now, I don't need any distractions," he explained later.

That leaves Victor and Danny with a pretty small world on many days: dorm, classroom, dining hall, library and back to their 200-square-foot room.

Its beige cinderblock walls are unmarked by a single poster. A handful of photographs of Danny's girlfriend and a shot of a beach adorn one desk, but otherwise the decor of Room 221 is

dominated by two "very uncomfortable" twin beds. A boom box that occasionally plays salsa music provides the sole source of entertainment.

Dirty clothes accumulating on the floor are a calendar measuring how many days remain until they can take their laundry home for the weekend.

Before a barrage of tests, exams and English compositions brought home the reality of college academics, Danny and Victor were content to remain in their room for the hour or so of studying they put in each morning or afternoon.

"I'm studying every day and I never did that before," Danny said during the second week of classes. "In high school, I was lucky if I studied once a week."

They study harder now. Once class work ramped up and the steady clamor outside their dorm room door got distracting, the pair started hitting the library -- rarely leaving before midnight.

Danny benefited academically from the month of preparatory classes he took during summer school, but Victor stumbled and teetered on the edge of failing a mandatory math class early in the semester.

### Family obligations

Then, just when he thought things couldn't get any worse, a lingering illness took the life last month of the man Victor considered his grandfather.

With his bank account depleted by college costs, Victor could offer only nominal

assistance as his family scraped up the money to pay for a funeral.

"I couldn't help out with expenses and that made me feel horrible," he said.

The family obligations caused him to slip even further behind in math, triggering even more guilt.

"Everything is hitting me at once," he said. "As if it wasn't hard enough before, now it's getting even harder."

But in what Staples called a "turning point," the grief forced Victor to separate family from school. It has actually helped in the last few weeks to return his focus on the goal of one day becoming a guidance counselor.

Distance hasn't prevented Staples from remaining a force in Victor's life and now Danny's, too. Rare is the day that the teacher isn't on the phone, haranguing the roommates to stay on top of their studies.

"He's all over our (expletive)," Victor, a psychology major, said with a laugh.

### **'Small feeling of comfort'**

Staples said it's paying off.

"The reality of the workload responsibilities have absolutely hit home for both of them," he said. "Victor's initial reaction was fear. But by going to class and doing the work he's starting to get a small feeling of comfort."

Outside the classroom, Danny and Victor are limiting their extracurricular activities to membership in the Student Alliance for Learning Success and Achievement (S.A.L.S.A.) -- a Hispanic student organization.

"The more Spanish, the better," Danny said.

A computer science major, Danny chose to enroll in a specific section of an American history course because the professor was Puerto Rican, as are he and Victor. It made him feel more comfortable.

The inability of an older brother and sister to find and retain meaningful employment provided the inspiration for Danny to choose Kutztown over an offer to enter a management training program at the Bethlehem auto parts store where he has worked since high school.

"You can work for a lot of hours and have nothing to show for it," he said. "I wanted to be different."

Once he arrived on campus, Danny quickly discovered an important way that Kutztown differs from Liberty High School. "There are a lot of Caucasians here," he volunteered one day.

Indeed, the borough of Kutztown -- where some of the first minority students who came to school had difficulty finding a barber who knew how to cut black hair -- has 4,500 mostly white residents. And the university has a student body that's about 85 percent white.

### **Self-segregation**

Like their counterparts on campuses across the country, Kutztown students tend to self-segregate by race and ethnicity outside the classroom, making it easy for Danny

and Victor to ignore students who neither look or speak like them (and for the white majority to ignore them).

"It doesn't bother me," Victor said. "I expected it."

Meeting Hispanic friends on campus, Danny and Victor indulge in elaborate handshakes and greetings couched in street talk. Take away the broad expanses of lawn, and Kutztown's eclectic old and new college architecture, and they could just as well be in Bethlehem.

Which is where Danny and Victor head the moment classes dismiss each Friday.

Danny's time at home is dominated by his longtime girlfriend and the three shifts he continues to work at the auto parts store.

Victor finds comfort in familiar meals and customs -- like playing dominoes with his mother and helping his siblings with their homework.

They are activities now tied to the clock that tracks the minutes until it's time to leave again. Each Sunday, there's a reprise of the motherly advice and affection that Victor got when he first departed in August.

Priscila Martinez no longer weeps after her son's car passes from view.

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