

# Overcoming Obstacles:

## *Critical for First-Generation Students' Success*

### Victor Petenkemani

Assistant Professor and Associate Dean  
Mercy College School of Business



Victor Petenkemani, assistant professor and associate dean for Mercy College's School of Business, feels kinship with a student when he learns they are the first in their family to attend college, recalling the trajectory of his own dreams.

"I grew up in a family of entrepreneurs, but my father did not finish high school," said Petenkemani, who grew up in Cameroon in Central Africa. His father started as a peanut vendor and then branched out as a tailor before building a successful import/export business with the help of his mother. "My parents built their success through hard work," said Petenkemani, a value they imparted strongly on him.

As one of 15 children, Petenkemani said he developed

a friendly competitiveness among his siblings, and knowing he wanted to make his mark, he dreamed of playing professional soccer. At the age of 16, his family's prosperity faced a dramatic decline following the death of his father. Petenkemani headed to France to play soccer, but amidst fresh grief and the loneliness of a new country, the talented athlete struggled to meet his goal of advancing in his sport.

"I learned to be responsible for my own destiny," he said. Determined to turn around the loss of one goal, he remained in France and shifted directions toward a college education, beginning at the Université du Maine in Le Mans – aiming his sights on a career in business.

### Patricia Anderson '05, M.S.'09

Mercy College Alumna  
Member of the Mercy Alumni Advisory Council



For many first-generation college students, the desire of their parents who were unable to obtain college degrees loomed large. "My mother's dream was for all five of her daughters to go to college," said Patricia Anderson '05, M.S.'09. Anderson's parents were both successful in trades. Her mother was a Madam C.J. Walker Beauty School-trained beautician, and her father was a World War II veteran with trades in mechanics and engineering. They both deeply embedded the importance of higher education goals on their daughters.

"My ancestors were brought to America as slaves and endured the endless legacy of enslavement through the Emancipation Proclamation and the Jim Crow South." Her parents migrated north to New York and started their family. "We were all taught to not put limits on our lives." Patricia obtained her associate degree in applied science from Bronx Community College in 1974 and became a registered nurse. Over the years she continually worked towards attaining a bachelor's degree but would stop because of challenging life circumstances and raising a family. It would take nearly two decades at Mercy College

of starting and abandoning the goal before she ultimately persevered with a four-year-degree in Nursing. “I credit Mercy. They always welcomed me back when I returned to try again. There was no judgment, only support,” added Anderson.

Anderson would go on to earn her Master of Science in Nursing Education from Mercy. Mercy plays an important role in the lives of Anderson’s family members as well with her sister, Carol Holman, M.S. ’01, and her granddaughter, Alexiah Williams ’20, both earning Mercy degrees, while another granddaughter, Aijah Williams, is currently working towards her degree at Mercy. “All of my sisters and I were first-generation college graduates and we achieved my mother’s dream.”

## Bruce Haber

Vice Chairman  
Mercy College Board of Trustees



For Bruce Haber, vice chairman of the Mercy College Board of Trustees, the time constraints he felt as a first-generation college student remain clear in his memory. “Like most Mercy students, I worked the entire time I was in college,” said Haber. Haber recalls the long days and hours he spent trying to do homework on the jostling rides of subways and buses on his return home from classes at City College (CCNY).

Though his father had earned his associate degree, Haber taking a place as the first in his family to earn a four-year degree was more than a goal, it was a necessary part of his whole family’s plan. “The path was pretty clear for me to go to college. That’s something my parents both instilled in me.” He later earned his Master’s of Business Administration degree at Baruch College, a stepping stone that propelled him to success as CEO of two public companies and his many other business ventures.

Haber admits the challenge of working his way through school taught him perseverance, but it also carried a toll. “I found myself struggling to not fall asleep in class (not always successfully) while pursuing my MBA at night,”

said Haber. In this respect, Haber sees the importance of Mercy’s work in recognizing and addressing the challenges that are unique to first-generation students. He points to supportive programming like PACT (which did not exist during his time in college) as being essential building blocks that help first-generation students reach goals even as they navigate a journey that includes balancing education, work and family obligations.

For sophomore Amy Estrada, college was a dream out of

## Amy Estrada ’24

Mercy College Student



reach for her single mother, who emigrated from Honduras as a teenager. Estrada was determined to go to college and carry both her and her mother’s dreams together. The Communication Disorders major, who is legally blind, was granted a full tuition scholarship through the Mercy Scholars program and felt a huge weight lifted off her shoulders. “I don’t let my disability limit or discourage me in any way but this made it easier,” said Estrada, who found her PACT mentor was helpful in leading her through her initial uncertainties. Additionally, she found Mercy’s Office of ACCESSibility a huge resource in ensuring her academic success. “All of these things made me feel comfortable that I could do this. I felt like I was understood and would be helped through any obstacles.”

Estrada is quick to point out first-generation students have a tougher time navigating college without following a previous trail of a parent. However, she believes what students like her might lack in mentoring, is made up for in determination and dreams. Her interest in helping other people has been a huge driver for her future goals. Though unsure what she wants for her ultimate career, she is certain that she wants to use her knowledge of psychology to help others who have struggled in their own lives. “I never wanted to look back and think to myself that I should have done that. I know how important this [education] is to finding opportunities in my life,” said Estrada.