



Transcript: Season 2 Episode 1

First-Generation Students: Voices of Resilience

A Conversation with Sami Shade and Zeta Bengoechea

Dr. Elcin Haskollar: Welcome to Rising Together! A podcast on the Art and Design of Inclusion. I'm Dr. Elcin Haskollar.

Curtis Anderson: And I'm Curtis Anderson.

Dr. Elcin Haskollar: Each month we'll have a special guest and we'll learn from their personal stories and experiences about how to create change. From thought provoking discussions to real life strategies, we'll explore the transformative power of inclusion and discuss how to create a world where every single voice matters.

Curtis Anderson: We hope you can join us as we dive into the art of creating inclusive communities. Let's embark on this journey of transformation one story at a time. Stay connected, stay engaged, and more importantly, keep rising with us.

Sami Shade: Because, like, failure isn't, like, an indication of, like, your character, especially if, like, you're learning a lot of things for the first time, like, both personally, academically, professionally. Just give yourself that grace is a big one.

Dr. Elcin Haskollar: Hey, everyone. Welcome back to another They're not just talented, they're also 1st generation students, meaning they are the 1st in their families to pursue college education. Let's get to know them. Hi, Zeta and Sami. Welcome to the show.

Zeta Bengoechea: Hi. Thank you for having us here. Thank you.

Curtis Anderson: Thanks for coming. Thanks for coming. I guess, can I just start off with the first question here just to break the ice? So I'd love for our listeners to get to know you better. Could you tell us a little bit about where you guys are from, your background, and what brought you to Ringling College?

Sami Shade: Hi. My name is Sami Shade, and I'm originally from Florida, and I am studying illustration with a concentration in visual development, which is, like, concept art, here at Ringling.

Zeta Bengoechea: Hi. My name is Zeta, Zeta Bengoechea. I'm originally from Argentina. I'm also studying illustration. I'm currently a sophomore, and, I actually been, in like, a international student for the past, 3 years. I studied in Hong Kong in the United War College Program, for 2 years doing the, international vocabulary. And then, I'm here at Ringling studying illustration, and it's a pleasure to be here.

Dr. Elcin Haskollar: Wonderful. We're so happy that you can join us today. So, Sami, let's start

with you. You are a veteran. You were in the Navy in San Diego, so you have a pretty unique, you know, perspective and the background.

So we would like to know how has, your experience in the military shaped your perspective on college life, academic life, and all sorts of things.

Sami Shade: So I enlisted in the navy as a means of escaping an adverse situation and for economic reasons. When I enlisted, I as far as I knew, I am, like, the only one to enlist and, like, go to college within my household. I do have, extended family members, but I was never close to them so I couldn't get, like, the guidance from them when I was going to into the navy and also navigating college. And I guess, like, one of the things that, is, I guess, unique to my perspective, when I was in the navy, I worked with people from all different walks of life, both within the US and international people as well. There were a lot of people whose like, the in order to, like, get citizenship in America, they had to, like, enlist in the navy, and then they were also, like, learning English as they were going through boot camp and school as well.

And in regards to, like, how that changes my perspective while in college, working with people from multiple backgrounds, kinda like teaches me more people skills, if anything, and how, like, we as, like, people both, in the professional and college environment, there's, like, a lot of, like, you know, issues and stuff that we face both systemic and personal. And I think that was like a big thing that I learned while I was in the navy.

Dr. Elcin Haskollar: Beautiful. What about you, Zeta? You're an international student and then you graduated from high school in Hong Kong, and then now you're in Sarasota, Florida. So, you know, tell us how your, you know, international background shaped your perspectives on college life, academic life, and everything that, you know, goes around in a college campus.

Zeta Bengoechea: Well, it definitely changes everything. Like I mean, until I was 18, the only thing I knew was like my high school in Argentina, I was applying to college, and then I applied to the United War College Program, and I got selected to go to Hong Kong. Before going to Hong Kong, I didn't know any English, and I had never been in higher education. So, it was really a challenge, especially getting used to the new system. I would say that Hong Kong and Florida, like the United States, is more academically strict and intense than what it was in the north of Argentina, at least for me.

I was also accessing public education at the time, which is very different from those other two opportunities. And, yeah, the system was way more strict. There were more hours of classes. It was like, it was harder to have times in which you will miss class, like, you really you really need to be sick, for example. I also didn't, have my parents, of course.

I used to live in my parents' house to go to high school, and then in Hong Kong, I was living in the college as well as here in Ringling. That's definitely new. There's, like, more extracurricular activities, more clubs, more things to be doing all the time. You know, in Argentina, it's usually like you go to college, you have your classes and then you go home and be with your family. Here it's more like I wake up in the morning, I go with the club, then I go to class, then I do volleyball, you know.

It's just like it's wonderful. I really like it. I really like to get involved and do all of those things. So it has definitely changed the rhythm that I have in my life, in a good way, I like to think. And but, yeah, it was a huge challenge to just get used to that at the start, especially, like, because I travel alone.

Like, I'm the first person of my family to, like, leave the country to, so or like fly such a long distance. And with the 12 hours of difference that we had in Hong Kong, like, it was also really hard for them to be there in case I had any questions. And with the language barrier also being the first person that knows English is like if I had any question about an essay or anything like that is like, they really didn't know how to answer. So it's just adapting to the new culture, to the new educational system, to the new, like, language too, is definitely a huge change.

Curtis Anderson: That's like that kind of like segues into this question I have for both of you. Right? So being a college student in general can be tough. Yes.

Zeta Bengoechea: Right? Mhmm.

Curtis Anderson: But being like a first generation college student comes with its own, like, unique set of challenges, you know? So can you share some of, like, what was some difficult moments that you've faced in this academic journey? Because you both come from, like, unique backgrounds before stepping into the world of academia. So once you're here, now that you're here, like, what are some of the challenges that you've faced and how you navigated those challenges?

Sami Shade: Yeah. I would say for me personally, I meant to mention this earlier, but, I guess one thing about because you mentioned this as being a private institution and how it's, like, very different from, like, public institutions, especially, public colleges. Like, I'll tell my friends who have gone to either other colleges or community colleges kinda like our workload and how our rules, like, our attendance is very strict. And they're like, what do you mean? Like, graduate school or something?

And I was like, no. And another thing is too, being at a private college and, like, I guess understanding specifically the industry I wanna go into is animation and entertainment industry. And the way you navigate that, it's more corporate and kind of like white collar, if that makes sense, like, than I thought it was before. Like, the environment I was in before, like, the work environment in the military, I enlisted as an undesignated sailor, which means you don't have an official rate or a job essentially, and I worked under boatswains' mates. In the environment that I worked in, it translating over into more of the, like, civilian workforce sector, it's more, like blue collar kind of environment.

And there's it's a I don't know how to describe it, but just different ways of, like, navigating it and different kinds of people that I've met from, like, in both different environments as well. When I enlisted, like, for me personally, I think one of the biggest things about not only being first generation but also, like, the unique background I come from, like, for me, like, social skills, like, learning how to be social and, connect more with people just naturally, not even in, like, a

networking sense has been, like, a big challenge for me. Because when I enlisted as an undesignated sailor, I wasn't aware of how other service members looked down at undesignated sailors and how that kinda sort of translated over into, like, a power sort of structure and then also, like, the chain of command that's, like, kind of officially established in the military. Like, I wasn't aware of, like, how all of that worked. So, coming to Ringling and trying to be social, has been, like, a big a big change since a lot of my experiences in the past have been, like, sort of negative.

But, like, the good thing about Ringling and coming here is that, like, I guess specifically with our campus since it's an art school, everybody is relatively, like, chill and, like, laid back. People aren't, like, you know, like, super strict other than, like, the professors. And, like, I was I remember I was, like, nervous at first. I was, like, I'm not sure how to, like, approach a question with professors. Like, I'm not sure what level of professionalism I need because some, professors are more laid back and, like, you refer them by their first name.

And then others have kind of, like, a different, like, way they run their class. So I would say that has been like as like 1st gen and, a veteran student that has been like a big change for me, but it's been a good change.

Zeta Bengoechea: I completely agree with that especially with like talking to professors. Because in Argentina is, I feel that it's pretty chill, like you usually just talk to your professors, you call them by, by their name. And I thought that was going to be really different here because it was quite different in Hong Kong. It was more of like a respect type of relationship. You wouldn't really be that close to your professors, you would only see them in the classroom.

But I, I made jokes for my professors here and I love it so much, you know. So definitely like the social skills is a challenge, like learning again how people communicate here and how you can adapt more to that communication that there is. I feel that in Hong Kong also like when you walk on the street people wouldn't really like say hi or like just like ask you how you're doing. Something that is really funny is that here I feel that sometimes people is like how are you doing? But they don't ask when they see you like to get an answer.

They just say it as just to say hi and I always thought they were asking me how I was doing. So I was like, I'm doing great and you and then they look back like, oh, she's actually responding to that, you know? So that was something I learned like, it was an experience, But apart from those things, I do believe that there's other challenges that international students face, in terms of just like, maybe something's being looked down on, as you were talking about too.

Sami Shade: Mine specifically was while in the military. As far as like veterans, veteran students go on campus, there's not, like, a big population of veteran students and, like, I haven't really had, like, a discussion with everyone, like, how do other students, like, view you and stuff like that. I think in regards to how students, like, view veteran students, I think it's just neutral because a lot of students, are like the children of, like, parents who are either service members or veterans, and they're here because of, like, tuition assistance, which is, like, why I'm here. Like, I I wouldn't be here, like, without tuition assistance in the VA. So I think it's just kinda more of like a neutral kind of stance on, like, specifically how veteran students are on campus.

Zeta Bengoechea: Yeah, I get it. Just like in, I was gonna actually give an example about it. It's more like in terms of like for example our accents. I feel that sometimes when you have an accent and it's really strong or you learn English in a very advanced age, people should estimate how you can communicate with them or that you can actually, you can actually communicate. You know, it might be a little bit hard, we do pronounce some stuff.

I'm still learning how to speak English, and it has been a huge challenge throughout my whole experience in these past 3 years, you know. I'm still learning

Dr. Elcin Haskollar: how to speak English. It's been 25 years, you know. Yeah. I mean it's a process.

Zeta Bengoechea: No. Yeah. I get it. And I actually really wanted to share this because, yesterday I was with a group of people and I shared with them that I was gonna be in this podcast. And a person told me that I shouldn't be in a podcast because it's really hard to understand me when I speak.

Dr. Elcin Haskollar: That is not true at all.

Zeta Bengoechea: Yeah. These are the type of things I'm talking about, you know, like, and I was like, I don't agree with that. I don't think that my accent, accent, should be a reason why I couldn't do something like a podcast, you know. And I do feel that I have a lot of very interesting things to say as a student and an international student, you know. And I really like my accent, I'm really proud of it, you know.

Because if you think about it, I was sent to Hong Kong throughout this program and the program didn't require me to know English, but they expected me to learn it once I was there. So once I arrived, this is so funny, but the first day I arrived to the college, like I had this person, this worker come to me and he literally like said something in English probably asking me like who I was, what, what, where I was supposed to go and then because I didn't know what to say and didn't know how to speak it, I was just in shock. And then he switched to Chinese because if I didn't speak English of course, I was supposed to speak Chinese and I also couldn't answer. It's just like, it's just, they were, they were all these situations in which I had to go through to learn the language because I was never able to actually study it. You know, it was more of a, like an experience.

So I'm really proud of it because I could be here talking in English with this accent or I will just not be talking in English, you know.

Curtis Anderson: I think you have important things to say not just because you're international but just because of who you are. So like you yeah. Sorry that someone told you that.

Sami Shade: What you were talking about kinda ties into what I was saying before, how back in the military, and even as a veteran working in an environment, with, like, a lot of different people from I said, like, from international. Like, there were people within my, a school, which is

the school you go to after boot camp to study whatever job you're gonna do. Like, one girl, she was learning English from the, like, the textbook that we had. And, like, she was still learning conversational English and stuff like that. But, yeah, there's, like, I guess one thing about veterans or something like that or I guess maybe service members in general.

And I understand why people think this is that, people, like, think, I guess, it's a lot of the same person that enlist. And a lot of people enlist out of necessity or to kinda, like, just grow themselves and, like, get more opportunities to them in life. And I guess, like, I guess, one thing that people think about, I guess, service members is, like, I guess, like, aggression or something like that, or veterans, just because of, like, the high stress environment we have to work in. But, like, for me personally, I'm more anxious and nervous than I am aggressive. So for me, it's, like, just talking to people and, like, starting a conversation has been, like, difficult.

But when you talk about, people learning different languages, like, sort of learning by doing, that happened a lot within the military and, like, I and even, like, veteran, like, world as well.

Zeta Bengoechea: Yeah. No. Definitely. It's something actually very common, and I feel that a lot of people should really be proud of it. You know?

It's not easy, and it's a long-term process. Like, I'm still learning, you know? And I really I really hope that in the future we start looking at accents as something people should be proud of and not ashamed for because it's really hard to go through that journey, you know? Especially if you're alone or if you're like, if you're in an environment in which you don't have the resources to actually learn how to pronounce things.

Dr. Elcin Haskollar: Mhmm. But I but I think the fascinating and the important part here is that both of y'all are talking about these challenges that a lot of college students are experiencing. And one of the things is that people are going to undermine you, and peep people are going to doubt you. So it's extremely important that you believe in yourself. And I'm I'm sure people doubted you as well.

Curtis Anderson: I mean, back in the day, I can say that because, you know, I'm a little older than you probably. So I mean, I just remember just being in high school, you know, just being factored or counted as just a number, you know, statistically. And I remember being in, my freshman year in high school, a history class, and the teacher is, like, look around. You know, black men, 1 out of 3 of you will be dead or in jail by 25. So that's already been spoken over you, and you don't even have the bandwidth to to dream, to make mistakes, and to learn from them.

So and I so I think there's just a level of resilience that comes with, like, not fitting the typical the mold, and that's okay. And I think that that resilience builds that that character and that makes you who you are. And, it's fascinating because you're here.

Dr. Elcin Haskollar: Yeah. Right?

Curtis Anderson: You've already you didn't just you didn't just become the first to, you know, go to college. Now you're you're here now. You know, you're thriving, and you'll be the 1st to

graduate college, and then you'll be the 1st to do other things. But going from, like, the doubts or the molds or the glass ceiling. Right?

You're here. Like, what are the resources or support systems on campus that you found the most helpful as you were navigating new, like, class schedules, new social situations, things like that? And are there can are there people or there moments that made that really special for you?

Sami Shade: There's a lot that I can think of. I have, like, tried to get, like, involved on campus by, doing, like, some, like, activities or, like, participating in, like, events and stuff like that going on with the CDI. And that kinda helps me connect a little bit more with people I already know and meet new people. I would say the CDI is a big one. The center of diversity and inclusion on campus, has just been good both, I guess, professional and, like, interpersonally for me, getting to, like, meet other people and, like, just do, like, events and activities with other people on canvas campus.

I think that's just been helpful. The our VA certifying official and our veterans club. Even though the veterans club is not really big and I don't have the opportunity to go to, like, every meeting, They definitely helped me a lot with just navigating the VA in general because there's, like, a lot of, like, paperwork and stuff like that that you have to do and, like, also find out about resources that are available to you. Because the VA is, like, you know, they're not gonna, like, call you up and, like, tell you everything. Like, you have to find a lot of stuff yourself.

So that has been helpful. I also really enjoy, like, going to the figure enhancement workshops just to, like, get out of my room and also, like, I really like, figure drawing and life drawing. So I think any of those clubs are pretty nice, but yeah.

Zeta Bengoechea: Yeah. No. I completely agree. One that I would like to mention first, of course, is the United World College Program that supports Davis scholars like me. It's what brings me here today, it's what allows me to get this education, and it's just so rewarding, you know, like I get to meet people from so many countries and at the same time, like I get to study what I love the most which is art, and I get to have a future in illustration.

But talking about, organizations in campus, definitely the Center for Diversity Inclusion. It was my first job on campus. So it was really a wonderful way to just meet new people. And I was actually really happy to see that there was a space specifically focused to increase diversity and inclusion on campus. That was a little bit of a shock I would say because it wasn't as big in my previous environments, but I love to contribute to it.

Then definitely, the Asian Student Alliance, the International Cultures Club, which I'm president of, and then the Hispanic and Latino club. All of those different organizations really bring together international students and allow us to have a space where we can just share things about cultures, find people from the same culture as us, maybe similar ones. And also, organize celebrations. Like a few days ago we had Diwali and we also had the day of the dead. And it's just like, I feel like because we are so far from home and also we don't really go home as much.

It's really nice to have those things on campus because, you can experience them even if you're

far and you can share it with those you love, so yeah.

Sami Shade: It wasn't on campus, but I did, find out about it through the veterans club, and it was the FOCUS Ford Fellowship I did at Purdue University, and it was for women student veterans. That has been a big help in just sort of, like, I guess, building my personal, like, community and, like, network. So that's something, like, I would highly recommend, like, if another woman veteran were to, like, ask me about resources that may be available either on or off campus. I think, like, something like that is really important, for just I think engaging, like, people as a whole because veterans aren't just, like, just defined by being a veteran. Like, you can't tell if someone's a veteran because you mentioned events that bring people from all the different clubs together.

Like, there are veterans who are also Asian. There are veterans that are also Hispanic or Latino or black and, like, from and also, like, queer as well from all different walks of life. So, like, being like a veteran can it, like, encompass, like, a lot more than just one thing.

Zeta Bengoechea: Yeah. And just to add up to that, like, I feel that international affairs is such a good resource for students, especially because we have to do so much paperwork every time we need to travel or if we win a competition or just for anything, you know. And that is all these very complicated forms that, of course, like, my parents also have no idea how to answer to them. Yeah. So, they do an amazing job by being there all the time for us, and helping us every time we need to leave the country or the first time we are here to make sure our visas are right and everything.

Those are things that I feel, I wouldn't be able to ask anyone else, and, of course, know my parents of ours. But yeah.

Dr. Elcin Haskollar: So y'all are amazing, and you've been working at the Center For Diversity and Inclusion for the past almost 2 years now as student outreach coordinators, and you're very involved on campus doing a million different things, and you're very talented, and you are first generation, so you don't have that, you know, family background to rely on for guidance. So what advice would you have for other 1st generation students like yourselves? Because they might be overwhelmed, you know, they might be stressed out. So what would you like to say to them?

Zeta Bengoechea: Well, definitely, that it's okay to be overwhelmed. It's definitely okay to be overwhelmed because there's like so many things that as an international student, and also as a first gen, you have to be looking over. There is like, I don't know, your insurance, your health, like, just cooking at home. Like, you go from living with your parents in which they might be looking over those things to being alone, and then knowing when you had to buy your flights, when you had when do you have to have your papers on order. You know, like, it's it's just a lot to be looking over, and it's definitely overwhelming.

And something that I always tell myself is that it is okay to make mistakes. It is okay to miss out on things, maybe on certain deadlines. It is okay if you're in a rush because, we are not only studying. We're also taking care of all those other things. And when you're alone, it can be a lot

sometimes, especially when you have finals.

And then, you also had to be, I don't know, planning your next trip, or you're gonna get home. Like, are you gonna take a bus? Just those things in general. But yeah.

Sami Shade: One thing my, professors and instructors always tell me is that you have to, in order to get one good drawing, you have to do a 1,000 or 100, bad drawings. So, like, just kinda like, you have to keep, like, practicing on something in order to get it good. Like, you learn by doing, and I think that can very much it's like sort of a philosophy that can be applied to anything in life. Like, you can't automatically know everything, especially if, like, your parents didn't teach you or anything like that or nobody's, like, instructing you. So it very much ties back into, like, it's okay to make mistakes and, like mistakes are inevitable and like change is like always a constant in life in general.

So I would say that's a big one.

Zeta Bengoechea: Yeah. And definitely ask questions. Like I feel like the thing that always helps me is to know that if I have a doubt, no matter how small it might be, to ask the question. Because, especially as I was saying, like, international affairs, if you have a question about a paper, go and ask it. Make sure that everything is in order.

If they can provide those resources, make sure to use them. Ask for help too. Like, I have wonderful friends that have helped me, for example, with the hurricane. I had to ask for a place to be, you know, and they offer me their space or just in general transportation. And when you're moving out at the end of the year and you have to carry all your boxes, Those things you can't really do alone.

So it's really important that you ask when you need help or when you just need any advice on things. Yeah. And if, like,

Sami Shade: I don't know. I guess, like, with me, like, struggling, like, with, like, anxiety or something like that, especially social anxiety. Unfortunately, one of the best things to do is, like, this it's exposure therapy sort of, like, going to events, talking to people. Both on and off campus, I would highly recommend for any, like, any student whether they're 1st gen or international, just see, like, what's available out there, like, beyond the campus. Like, don't limit yourself just to, like, the people on campus because there's a lot of, especially, like, industry specific, resources.

Like, there's Warrior Art Camp where you can do, like, painting classes and stuff like that over the summer. And then there's also, you know, going to, like, networking events with other artists from all over, at places like Lightbox or CTN Expo. But yeah. Definitely, like, reaching out as much as you can. Yeah.

Curtis Anderson: Wow. That was a that was a great conversation.

Dr. Elcin Haskollar: Yeah. They are amazing. They're really amazing.

Zeta Bengoechea: Thank you.

Dr. Elcin Haskollar: You know, yeah, this might be, like, one of the best episodes that we shot.

Curtis Anderson: I'm like, I just tell me more.

Dr. Elcin Haskollar: Any final thoughts?

Zeta Bengoechea: Just thank you so much for having us here. I feel like I'm really proud of being a first gen and international student and I really look forward to advocate for this in our community. So I'm really happy to be here and talking about all these very important topics. It's a really nice space to be having these conversations. So thank you for opening it for us and, yeah.

Sami Shade: Yeah. As a first in student, thank you not only for having me here, but also, like, working in the CDI, having your guidance, and also, like, just being there, I guess, for us as international students has been a lot. And yeah. I guess, like, I'm also looking forward to, like, I guess, ways we can, like, interact with the campus more and also just, like, I guess, improve for me both, like, personally and socially and also in, like, the professional life as well. But thank you so much. Yeah. Thank you.

Dr. Elcin Haskollar: Thank you for being here.

Curtis Anderson: And that concludes today's conversation. Thank you for tuning in and joining us on this journey of design and inclusion. You can find all of our episodes, transcripts and other wonderful resources on our website: ringling.edu/risingtogether. Join us next time for more insightful conversations. And remember to stay connected, stay engaged and keep rising together with us.

Rising Together is produced at the Soundstage in partnership with Studio Labs, and Art Network at Ringling College of Art and Design. The show is produced by Dr. Elcin Haskollar, Curtis Anderson, Keith Elliott, Nick Palladino, Troy Logan and Marquee Doyle.