

UIS freshman determined to finish, go her own way

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Though considered a first-generation student, Christal Luster isn't the first in her family to go to college — she's the first to go on her own terms and with the commitment to finish.

Luster is a freshman at the University of Illinois at Springfield. Her parents did not attend college, but each of her three older siblings has received some post-secondary training.

Her two sisters, age 36 and 31, took a few classes before returning home to work for the family's company, Clintex Laboratories near Chicago. Her brother, 28, trained to become a personal trainer.

"My whole family works for the company," she said. "Everything they did, with the exception of my brother's personal training, was to go toward the company. I am the only child to actually go away to school.

"My goal ... is to go to school for something I want to go to school for and not just take classes here and there to come back to the company."

It took Luster's father a while to accept her goal, but he eventually came around, she said. Her mother, who never had the opportunity to go to college, has long had the dream that one of her children would be a college graduate. Luster said she realizes that dream now rests with her, but she's not chasing after her mother's aspirations. She's pursuing her own — she hopes someday to become a writer.

Since middle school, she's been on the right path. She was salutatorian of her eighth grade and was in the top 10 percent of her class at Marian Catholic High School, a college preparatory school in Chicago Heights.

"From day one, freshman year, they impress upon you the importance of going to college and going all the way — graduating," she said.

Her path to UIS wasn't without bumps, however, and included a last-minute change of plans in April when she decided, for personal reasons, against attending an out-of-state university that had offered her nearly a full ride. One of the few schools still accepting freshmen at that time was UIS.

"I stepped onto campus at UIS and said, 'Wow, this is home,'" she said. "I really love my classes. I'm enjoying the college experience. I get homesick occasionally, but I like the small campus because I get to know everybody and I don't feel lost."

The Center for First-Year Students at UIS helps students such as Luster adjust to the collegiate environment.

Center director Marcellus Leonard and a couple of peer guides help students acquire the study skills, learning strategies and language needed to help them succeed.

Thirty-five of UIS's 311 first-year students this year were first-generation, Leonard said.

Luster credits both her high school's rigorous preparation and UIS's campus environment for helping her achieve her goals thus far, and she also credits her faith, which she said has gotten her through tough times and hard decisions.

"My aunts, uncles, cousins constantly tell me how proud they are of me. And on one hand, I'm very proud also. I feel so happy that they acknowledge the hard work and effort I've put in," she said. "But on the other hand, that raises the stakes because now they're not going to expect any less, so I have to keep the grades up."

First-generation students are statistically more at risk for not completing their college degrees. According to National Center for Education Statistics data from the 1990s, just a little more than 40 percent of first-generation students who started at four-year institutions earned their bachelor's degree within five years. Such students reported a fear of failure, lack of financial aid and feeling generally accepted on campus as potential obstacles.

Luster, however, is in for the long haul.

"Both of my parents have provided so much for me material-wise," she said. "I appreciate it, and I feel that because they've worked so hard to push me this far, the least I can do is run with it. And that's what I've been trying to do my whole life."

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