I always thought I’d be in college, I kind of always knew that’s where I was headed. I guess I grew up as a basketball fan and I always thought it would be really cool to go to Carolina. Luckily for me it was possible and it happened. But it was kind of one of those things I always knew.

It was a big adjustment coming from a small town but it kind of helped because there was a lot of people and you couldn’t help getting caught up in everything that was going on. There was a lot of opportunities to become involved. I moved in a few days before everybody else because I was in the marching band and those first few nights on campus I was scared to death because I was living in a room all by myself, there was nobody in my suite, there was hardly anybody on my hall. It was nerve racking because you were the first one there and you were anticipating everyone getting there. What was going to happen, what was it going to be like was I going to like it, were we all going to get along, my room mates and I.

The biggest thing that helped me was just getting involved and finding a group that you may not know everything about them, you may not have a similar background from where you’re from but you at least have a common interest in something you can relate to. Communication is the big key in surviving first year. I’d always had a room to myself and basically been an only child and it was really hard coming in and having to live with six or seven other girls in my suite. But they were really the first group of people that I got to know personally and it was really helpful because they were all going through the same things that I was.

The room mate situation, it’s different for everybody. One problem my room mate and I had the first semester was we had different schedules she didn’t have class until twelve, I had class at eight. It was just kind of a clash of how our lifestyles were. And that created some conflicts but it worked out.

The workload adjustment was probably one of the hardest adjustments there was. You have to put in a lot more time out of class, which was something I was not used to. I didn’t really have to study in high school, it wasn’t really a big deal. That was one of the biggest changes I had to make was learning study habits and learning what was efficient. The biggest thing is not to wait too late to ask for help. Go to your professors, most of them are really open to sitting down and talking to you. That was one thing I utilized a lot, especially in the English classes. And they were really helpful in giving feedback and reading papers and giving comments. The resources on campus are great, the writing center, I know a lot people who use that and it was very helpful for them.
Another thing a lot of us did is we would get small study groups together and just get three or four students together and work on some stuff and go over problems and review notes. And that was very helpful just to go over it and review it on a smaller level. One thing my sister-in-law always told me was to just surround myself with people better than myself. And that way they kind of push you towards being your best. And if you’re always around someone who’s better than you you’re always striving to do better yourself.

My favorite spot on campus would probably be just being in the quad in the springtime. Everybody just comes out, grabs a towel, lays around and studies, chats, and just enjoys each other’s company. It’s just nice to be able to get outside after you’ve been cooped up in a dorm for a few months.

Having a college education will make it a lot easier to get a job. I found that out a lot this summer, just trying to find a job for the summer especially in the economy. It really helps to have the experience and a degree. It’ll just be really helpful later down the line, especially in what I want to do in nursing. I can’t do that without a college degree. There’s always that goal that I’ve had of being the first person to finish college in my family. One day it’ll all be worth it, it’s trying and it’s hard but there’s a goal, and just trying to reach it.

---

**Ron Bilbao Interview Transcript**

I was born and raised in Miami Florida and I came to UNC for college about three years ago. Coming here was a completely different experience, my parents don’t speak any English, they were born and raised in Venezuela and Columbia. They wanted to go to college, my father actually had to drop out of college to go to work when he was younger. So they knew the value of an education and they wanted to make sure they could pass that on to their kids. The only question was really ever a matter of paying for it. We really had no plan in terms of how we were going to pay for college. We hadn’t really thought it through, applied for some loans, you know see what we can get. Carolina was still a little bit out of reach, but when that letter came in from the Carolina Covenant it just made everything pretty simple.

The Carolina Covenant is a promise. It’s the university telling you that you that you have an opportunity to go to college to get an education just like everyone else. These kind of walls of rich people going to school with poor people not going to school, they’re kind of broken down at this university and we were the first ones to do that. So it’s promising you that in four years you’ll graduate with an incredible degree and it will be completely one hundred percent debt free. The decision really comes down to what you want to major in and what you want to do with your life because the finances are no longer a barrier.
My parents dropped me off actually the first day when we came for C-Tops orientation and we walked around for a little bit, they saw Franklin Street and then they went home and then it’s just you and your life. I knew that I needed to talk to friends, roommates, people in student organizations. I joined as many student organizations as possible, I met administrators, I made friends with administrators in the Carolina Covenant and admissions and lots of people that would help me get through and pretty much arrived at this place where I feel comfortable where I am.

Sometimes I felt a little bit pressured, not because of the Scholarship putting pressure on me or my parents, but really myself. I felt like there was so much that I needed to do to give back to this place for giving me so much and to give to my parents and to not take this opportunity for granted and sometimes you feel a little bit overwhelmed at these pressure of being a first generation student as well. But now that I’m a senior I think that I found a real comfortable place in that you know I think that I have just as much right to be here and just as much opportunities as anyone else.

I know that sometimes people feel overwhelmed, I myself felt a little overwhelmed the first semester you go into these classes they’re a lot harder than when you were in high school, when you were in middle school, they expect a lot more from you and you expect a lot more from yourself to be honest. While at times you can feel that you’re not going to make it through the most important thing is to get through that first year and then after that you’re going to find this comfort zone and you’re going to make it through because of all of this support that you have from your friends, from your family back home, all the professors and the administrators and faculty members that you meet that want to help you.

My piece of advice for any student in general not just first generation or covenant but really any college student is to never give up, even in the darkest times, even when it’s finals even when its three in the morning and you still haven’t started studying for you second test the next day. Just keep going because it really does get a little bit easier as you go through. It’s just like any new thing that you start, it may seem overwhelming at first but you’ve just got to find that groove and I’ve definitely found it here at Carolina.

Paul Cuadros Interview Transcript

My story really starts with my dad, my father. He was originally born in Peru, he was an orphan, but it was always his desire to come to the United States and in 1960 he came by himself, he left his wife and my two brothers behind in Peru and he moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan. He pretty much worked by himself, living by himself, really typical immigrant story here in the United States and he saved up enough money to eventually bring my mother and my two brothers to Ann Arbor. About nine months later, after the
family was re-united I was born, the first American in my family to be born here in this country.

Growing up in Ann Arbor, which is a college town very much like Chapel Hill a little bigger, was a great experience. Everybody is sort of focused on going to school almost from the very get go and that certainly was my fathers desire for me and my brothers. That was not necessarily an easy thing. We had a language barrier we had to overcome and we had a cultural barrier that we had to sort of overcome as well. I could immediately sort of feel that impact right away once I got into college which was only about a mile and a half away from my house. But even though the distance was really short the sort of cultural travel that I had to do to get to Michigan was really far. Kids from all over the world, kids from a higher social economic status than myself and very few Hispanic students. I had to sort of find a way to engage them and find commonalities with them where we could be friends and adapt to one another.

Freshman year was a little tough I think for the same reasons that it’s tough for everybody. Living away from home, even though it was a mile and a half away it was really as I said kind of far, managing your time, managing your classes and I was really ambitious my freshman year, which was probably a bit of a mistake. Probably a little bit too over confident and I should have probably taken it a little bit easier to acclimate myself to the university, it what I would advise students today. Just use that first semester to kind of get to know yourself, to know what you can actually do in class. We have a generation of young people who are self educating not a lot of support from home. Either because mom and dad are working too much or because there is a language or cultural barrier in place.

You almost develop this feeling that I don’t need anybody’s help, I can handle it myself. Sometimes that’s an issue of pride and I think a lot of students have this sense of pride, especially those that put themselves into college on their own. You need to set aside that sometimes and seek out help. The university has a lot of different resources and everybody is here to help you succeed but seeking that help out is up to you to do.

I would say to any perspective college student to get involved in your university and in your community. I’ve seen and met a lot of different students here on this campus and I think its one of the great things here about UNC, about Carolina is that so many students are involved in various issues and causes. They’re interested in things, applying themselves in different ways and giving back to the community and they’re passionate about something. I think one of the issues with retention especially for minority students is that you feel so alienated sometimes and isolated and its only when you get involved in something that you really begin to sort of feel part of that community, that school, and then it becomes your own. Anyone who decides to go on to higher education has already made a commitment to do it and I would encourage anyone who has decided on something to fulfill it. So if you’ve decided to come to school and seek higher education then you owe it to yourself to fulfill that and to complete it no matter what it takes.
Stacie Hewett Interview Transcript

The decision to go to college was something that I always considered. My grandparents raised me, and I always enjoyed school, always did very well in school. So it was expected that for me to give myself some options and some more opportunities coming from such a rural area in North Carolina that college was the next logical step.

Carolina was not the first choice, not because it wasn’t the best choice it just wasn’t something I had considered or had information about prior to choosing it. But I knew that college was going to be what shaped my future. So when I got an opportunity to interview for a scholarship for UNC I started to do some research, and once I knew it was an option for me, it seemed like the only option for me.

It was a difficult decision because, there were five or six of my closest friends who had already accepted to go to another college, we’d planned it all out, but I’d never wavered on the decision because I felt like this was going to be something that would give me the best options for the future. When I came to Carolina the first day I met five or six students from similar backgrounds, from small rural places, didn’t really know anybody else coming here and we were all living in the same dorm and we immediately became close friends and they became my college family. So because of that I immediately had a support group.

I had made straight A’s all through my childhood, graduated second in my class, even though it was a small class, less than one hundred. And when I came to Carolina I immediately realized I was no longer at the top of the class. That’s a humbling experience for somebody who really loves school, always did well. I quickly figured out that I didn’t necessarily have the study habits I needed for a school like Carolina and needed to figure out how to make sure I was successful here. Often times students will come and not do as well as they would like or expect to but their pride keeps them from getting assistance with that. And so my advice is for students to make sure they don’t wait until a situation is too far gone that they can’t salvage it and make themselves available to resources and individuals who can help them.

When I was here as an undergraduate student, I worked here at the business school as a work studies student. When I graduated and started working at the University full time I was working in a different department. When I was ready for a challenge, ready for what I felt was a promotion I immediately called my old supervisor from the business school and asked her to see if she could find something here that she thought would be good for me. I’m not sure I really would have thought my little work study job doing filing and office work would have made that much of a difference, but because I handled that in a professional way it eventually helped me make the connection to a much longer career. So students should really think about no matter what it is they’re doing, volunteer work, part time job, internship, whatever they’re doing they should do their best and they should get to know as many people as they can because they never know who its going to
be that will help them move further in the future, who they’re going to have to call back for a reference, who’s going to speak on their behalf to give them an opportunity.

I chose to stay at Carolina for the last 20 years because I had an immediate sense of family and connection and home when I came here as a student. I don’t think that’s different than a lot of people that I meet. Often times when I interview students and ask them why they chose Carolina if they had other options and the majority of them will tell me that once they came to visit they immediately knew this was the place for them and I felt that same way. I’ve never regretted staying here, it’s really afforded me lots of opportunities I’m not sure I would have had going somewhere else.

---

**Sophia Nicholson Interview Transcript**

My mom was very committed to my education because she grew up in Korea and by the time she had gotten into high school she had to start taking care of her family like of her younger brothers and sisters. She wanted me to experience life and to experience the world and be successful and know what success is and how it feels like.

I think when it really came into focus was probably sophomore year. That was when you start looking at colleges and the ones you want. I wanted to go to a great liberal arts college and one that’s well known and when I get that degree when I attain it I’m going to feel like I really achieved something. When I came to Carolina for the undecided students that was it, I knew. Like walking through the quad, there’s nothing like it. My families reaction when I got into Carolina was insane. They threw a huge party, they had it together in like two days.

I hadn’t even gone to college, hadn’t set foot in it, hadn’t done the financial aid any of that, but I already felt like I had accomplished something. The first day I was here it was hot. It was very very hot and humid good old Carolina weather. If it was negative twenty I wouldn’t have even noticed because I was just so excited to be here and just to finally after all this build up put my money where my mouth was and start going to college.

I was nervous but the excitement completely overruled that. I was ready to just get to know people, get to know my professor. There are things you just cannot know intuitively when coming to a college like Carolina. So first generation students are kind of at a disadvantage because they don’t have that background they don’t have those people at home saying this is what we went through so you can apply it. You have to be more self-motivated to be a first generation college student I think.

It was very easy to just get off track and just I’m not going to do my homework, I’m going to procrastinate, I’m going to watch some TV. But my counselors and my mother and my brother they were always there keeping me on my toes telling me ‘Sophia you
need to do this.’ Not even you have to go to college because it’s what you’re supposed to do, you should want to go to college, because you should want a better life.

Of course Carolina is so much fun and there’s always something to do. In that same respect it’s got that small town feel. There’s always room to grow and there’s always opportunities and so you should never ever feel self conscious about yourself. There’s always this sense of you know you can talk to anybody and they’re going to be very receptive. There’s more of a sense of community here at Carolina. If I were just to give one piece of random advice it would be, be open-minded. I find that being open minded about things, about new experiences, about new people will always make the situation much less awkward for you, for the people around you and you’ll end up just having a great time.

The real, I think real joy of knowing Carolina or being at Carolina is getting to appreciate how diverse everything is and just getting to meet so many people and the opportunity is there, you should seize it.

________________________________________

Andre Wesson Interview Transcript

My name is Andre Wesson, I am from Rocky Mount North Carolina. I am a proud Alumnus of the university, graduated in 2004. I work in the Academic advising programs now.

I hail from a single parent household and so my mother bar none was the most influential factor in me going on to college. A premium was put on education from a very early age, she did a lot to put me in a position to attend different camps when I was growing up, attend different leadership seminars during the summers.

I was fortunate enough to attend the summer bridge program, which I think was absolutely critical. The summer bridge program was an eight of nine week academic program where entering first year students were able to come to the university and take two courses, become familiar with the campus, become familiar with the resources, and really adjust before they came in august.

I still had to go through some of those first semester things of getting grades that I had never seen before, feeling like Carolina was too big of a place for me, feeling like it was too challenging, perhaps I made the wrong decision, I should have gone someplace closer to home. All of those things I think are typical for first year students. Regardless of whether they are first generation, regardless if they come from lower income household. You know, Carolina starts here, whether your high school stopped here or stopped here. I went to a high school that didn’t have a lot of AP courses or IB courses so a lot of the courses in the first semester were extremely intense, more intensive than anything I had taken before.
Perhaps the most trying time in my first semester was the first time I saw the grade of a 38 I believe. So when I say that you see grades that you have never seen before that you never thought existed I got a 38 on an English paper, and English was my strength. And so I remember calling home crying, between me and you, calling home crying and telling my mom, look I think this is out of control, Carolina is just a little bit too crazy for me. If I can’t pass, do well on an English paper, what can I do well on.

I just knew there were some things that Carolina was going to push me, some directions that Carolina was going to push me in that may place me out of my comfort zone, and I became fine with that. And I think that’s something I would encourage all students to do, particularly first generation college students to be comfortable being pushed beyond those boundaries.

Having family and friends as a support system is absolutely critical in coming to college. For me my mother was a motivational factor just because this is a person who I had the closest relationship with. Again my ultimate desire was not to disappoint her. I think it’s a fine line between leaning on your support resources and actually becoming dependent on them. College is a time where you step away from that and you start to mature on your own whether it be academically, personally, just in how you process the world around you.

I feel very fortunate to have the opportunity to work at my alma mater, so as an academic adviser now I absolutely love it. So all day everyday what I get to do is speak with students who are going through the same process I went through not too long ago. Sometimes it’s helpful to have someone I think who has been there recently and recognizes that we feel like we have everything figured out and can still add value to some of the things that we’re thinking or show us opportunities that we weren’t thinking or show us potential pitfalls before we get there. And I think for so many incoming first year students, particularly first generation college students, there is a stigma of being ashamed a little bit of asking for help. Or feeling that if we ask for help it means we are somehow inferior to other students.

There will come a point where you hit a wall. And what Carolina does is provide a wonderful support system of resources across the board, whether it’s learning disabilities resources, the writing center, the learning center, the math help center. You have to ask for help at some point and that’s one of the things I think at the basic level will benefit us once we leave the university, once we graduate, once we go forward. Because each of us, all people have to ask for help at some point, so take advantage of the resources, max them out fully, and watch yourself grow both academically and personally.