Student's Name

Professor's Name

Course Name/Code

Date

Social Class Autobiography of a First-Generation College Student

My name is Maria Hernandez, and I am the first person in my family to earn a college degree. That fact is simple to state and complicated to carry — it means something different depending on who is in the room when you say it.

I grew up in East Los Angeles, the eldest of four children. My parents came from Oaxaca, Mexico, in 1998, a year before I was born. My father worked in construction. My mother cleaned houses five days a week and took in laundry on weekends. We lived in a two-bedroom apartment on Cesar Chavez Avenue, my parents in one room, my siblings and I sharing the other. I did not think of us as poor when I was small. I thought of us as a family that worked hard and was careful with money, which is how my parents framed it, deliberately and consistently, and which I now understand was an act of protection as much as description.

I became aware of class in the way most children do — through comparison. In fourth grade my school was rezoned and I began attending a school in a neighbouring district where many of my classmates had things I did not: new backpacks every year, money for the book fair, birthday parties at venues rather than in backyards. I was not resentful, exactly. I was observant. I filed away the differences and tried to understand what they meant. What I arrived at, slowly, was the understanding that the differences were not about character or effort — my parents worked harder than anyone I had ever seen — but about starting position. That understanding, formed before I had the vocabulary for it, is essentially what sociology formalises.

My parents treated education the way some families treat religion — as the organising principle of the household, the thing everything else was arranged around. My mother checked my homework every night until I was in eighth grade, working through assignments in a language she had never formally studied, asking me to explain what I was doing and why. My father attended every parent-teacher conference, often still in his work clothes, and asked the same question every time: is she working hard enough? The answer was always yes. The question was about something else — about whether they were doing enough, whether the sacrifice was producing what it was supposed to produce.

Applying to college was the first time I fully understood how much I did not know about how systems worked. My high school college counsellor had a caseload of over four hundred students. I navigated the Common App, financial aid forms, scholarship applications, and college visits largely alone, using the internet and the advice of a mentor I had found through an after-school programme. I applied to eleven schools and was accepted by seven. I chose UC San Diego, which offered me a financial aid package that, combined with two outside scholarships, made attendance possible without my family taking on debt.

I studied Mechanical Engineering, which I chose because it was difficult and because I had been told, implicitly and explicitly, throughout my education that students from my background were more likely to succeed in fields with clear, measurable outcomes. I chose it partly in response to that message — to prove it wrong — and partly because I was genuinely good at it. I graduated in four years with a 3.6 GPA and a job offer from an aerospace firm in El Segundo.

What my journey taught me is not that hard work is enough — I watched my parents work harder than I ever have and remain financially precarious their entire lives. What it taught me is that hard work combined with access, information, and the right intervention at the right moment can change a trajectory. I had those things in addition to the hard work.

Many people like me do not. That gap is not a character story. It is a structural one. And I intend to spend my career understanding it well enough to do something about it.