NP 37 - Access Isn't Readiness: How First-Gen Students Build Financial Confidence

A student can do everything asked of them to get into college and still arrive unprepared for what comes next. Even when tuition is covered, college can still become expensive fast. Students may be dealing with late refunds, work hours, family responsibilities, and costs they never saw coming. For first-generation students, there is often an emotional side too. They are trying to fit into a new world while staying connected to the people and places that shaped them.

That experience is deeply personal for Dr. Charmaine Troy, who arrived at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill with just $20 in her pocket. A first-generation scholar from rural North Carolina, she has spent more than 15 years in higher education and has created first-generation student success programs at Georgia Gwinnett College, Virginia Tech, and Georgia Tech. She is also the founder and CEO of First Gen Talk, a mobile app designed to strengthen financial literacy, college access, and student success, and the founder of LiftEd, a nonprofit that supports college readiness and economic mobility in first-generation communities.

We talk about what colleges often overlook when they focus on admission without giving the same attention to persistence. Dr. Troy shares how financial stress can quietly influence a student's grades, relationships, career choices, and willingness to pursue opportunities that may pay off later. She also walks through the framework in her book, *No One Told Me About Money*, and explains why real support cannot be confined to a workshop or a single campus office. Students are more likely to thrive when financial guidance, career exposure, mentoring, and early intervention are woven into the broader college experience.

Show Notes:

[02:50] Charmaine introduces herself and shares how her work in higher education became centered on first-generation student success.
[05:02] Starting college with only $20 revealed the difference between gaining access to higher education and being financially prepared to stay.
[08:48] Scarcity can shape which opportunities students pursue and whether they feel comfortable imagining a different future for themselves.
[11:57] The First Gen Opportunity Pathway connects exposure, skills, opportunity, and income to long-term financial confidence.
[15:49] Colleges often address immediate financial needs while overlooking the mindset and career exposure that also influence student success.

[18:17] Financial aid may cover a bill, but it does not teach students how to manage refunds, credit, work hours, or unexpected expenses.
[20:43] Strong first-generation support works as an institutional ecosystem rather than a collection of isolated programs.
[23:18] Shame can keep students from identifying as first-generation or asking for help when they need it.
[24:51] Stopout data usually captures when a student leaves, but not the smaller financial and emotional problems that began much earlier.
[27:12] The conversation closes with information about *No One Told Me About Money* and where listeners can follow Dr. Troy's work.

Links and Resources:

Civitas Learning
Dr. Charmaine Troy
FirstGenTalks
FirstGenTalks - Instagram
Charmaine Evette Troy, Ph.D. - Georgia Tech
Charmaine Troy - LinkedIn
Dr. Charmaine Troy - Instagram
No One Told Me About Money: Building Financial Confidence as a First-Generation Student