

**First Generation College Student Narrative:**  
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My immediate and extended family as well as my grade school and high school teachers always talked to me about “when” I would go to college, not if. So, I just assumed it was a necessary step I would take in my life. They also told me there were no opportunities in my small rural town in Pennsylvania and that I would need to make my life somewhere else. So, I always planned on leaving. Unfortunately I didn’t have anyone in my family who went to college to turn to in figuring out exactly how it was going to happen. Luckily, I went to a Catholic high school where most students were expected to go to college. So, everyone took the PSATs and later on the guidance counselor told us to register for and take the SATs. I didn’t know I had to study for them, but I knew where to sign up and where to show up. Luckily I did pretty well and all of sudden glossy brochures from colleges and universities started showing up in the mail. I must say I was impressed by the pretty pictures of the various college campuses. I knew I would need to apply for scholarships, work, and take out loans to pay for my college education, but because all my teachers and family members said I could do it and stressed the value of an education, I forged ahead and figured I could pay off the loans later. I applied for admission to a few universities, basing my decision on where to apply on how many application fees I could afford on my part-time work at the Burger King and which schools had the best brochures. I had no idea college rankings existed. Luckily I was accepted to all of the schools to which I applied but unfortunately couldn’t afford the one I would have most liked to attend, even with the financial aid package offered. I visited

two of the other three places I applied. My grandmother took a bus trip with me to visit one and I took a train ride by myself to visit another. I decided on the school I hadn't visited, The George Washington University in Washington, DC. I had gone on a bus trip to DC in the fourth grade and thought the city was beautiful.

Upon arriving at GWU I was pretty afraid. Going from a very small town to a large city was quite a shock. However, I found a student whose brother had gone to GWU before her and stuck to her like glue for the first few weeks. I made several friends and was pretty distracted with doing fun things my first semester. My grades were evidence of this. However, I was not used to low grades, so in my second semester I focused on my studies and turned my grades around. A big challenge was dealing with the GWU financial aid office. As I was paying for my college education completely through financial aid (including work study) I spent a lot of time in that office. Unfortunately, I spent more time than I would have if I had had someone who had gone through it before to help me. Most of my GWU friends did not need to visit the financial aid office very often, either because they did not receive financial aid or because their parents navigated the financial aid process for them. It was frustrating, but eventually I figured it out. That mastered, I felt I could do anything.

However, I soon realized that I needed to have some goal beyond attending college. I asked myself, "Now what?" and didn't have a ready answer. I'd entered GWU majoring in international affairs, but after my first year or so I decided I wasn't too excited about my history and political science classes. I was excited, however, about my economics classes. During annual advising at the international affairs school I mentioned my realization to my randomly-assigned advisor. Without skipping a beat she matter-of-factly told me that I belonged in the College of Arts and Sciences and should major in Economics. She even suggested a five-year B.S./M.A. combined Economics program. I trusted her judgment, said okay, and she handed me the forms. My faith in her judgment was well-placed and I went on to earn not only a B.S. but also an M.Phil. and a Ph.D. in Economics. I don't remember her name but I will always appreciate her pointing me in the right direction.