

First Generation College Student Narrative:
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No one in my family had done it yet -- the result of a combination of limitations, mostly financial -- but I was *determined to GO AWAY to college*. My brother and sister had managed to go to community colleges and live at home, which was what they could afford with their jobs and what little my parents could supplement. But I wanted to be a poet, such an irrelevant occupation, and I couldn't do it at the community college. I needed to get out.

So I went to my high school guidance counselor, who didn't know much, really, and then to the public library where I scoured college and financial aid books. I applied to every scholarship I could find -- an inefficient enterprise -- and to 3 colleges: that community college, the local state school, and the small, expensive, private school I really wanted. When the numbers came in, it was cheaper to go to my dream school than the state university! I repeat this story often: private colleges have more money to give, so go for the dream.

So I went to the big city, the expensive school, the high academic challenge, the exclusive club. I had no idea what to expect of college life. No one had told me drinking stories or frat prank tales. Honestly, I thought college was supposed to be like becoming a monk for 4 years: intense, intellectual, spartan. I was paying a lot to do this; I was going to milk it for all it was worth.

So the culture shock was enormous.

First, there was big city life: I met my first gay person, first free thinker, first ... everything. Then there was the class issue: hillbilly meets privileged city girls. One of my first challenges was trying to convey without shame that I could not put in \$100 for the matching bedspreads, rug, and curtains my roommates suggested we buy together. Then there was the intellectual disappointment: we didn't do much late night soul searching; most girls went out drinking at frats. I didn't know what an outlier I was, looking for honest discussion in my dorm. Then there was the deep homesickness, over against the steep cost of calling home. I remember pacing the halls trying not to cry. Then there was the wall of moral dilemmas. The first vote in hall council was whether to allow men to stay overnight on our floor. No way was I going to be the dissenting vote.

So, while I was doing the monk thing and getting good grades, I felt all emptied out and awash. When I went home, I couldn't even begin to explain what was happening in that other life. I remember feeling that I had been someplace wild and strange and indescribable, and they could never understand. (Of course, they could have, having survived their own cross-cultural traumas in war and work, but I didn't know that.)

Nor do I remember finding sensitive or supportive mentors to guide me. I was scared of my advisor, a brash egotistical novelist who stumped me with questions I was afraid to answer. I didn't discover until years later that one is allowed to ask a librarian a question. Was there a writing center? A career center? I have no idea. I never found them. My RA lived next door and she was a big help. She physically removed me from my desk on Friday night and took me to the coffee house.

I survived because I believed in my mission, I think. I expected it would be hard; it was harder. I stuck it out. I got good grades. I still look to those years to prove I can do anything I decide to do. But I don't recommend that level of loneliness and terror. One of my goals as a librarian at OU is to be a friendlier face, so hopefully new students don't find their transition quite so hard as mine.