

First Generation College Student Narrative:
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I was brought up with the expectation of going to college. Both of my parents had always emphasized getting a good education and being capable of self-reliance. Mom was a good student but never had the opportunity to go to college after graduating high school. Dad was a self-confessed troublemaker in school and later regretted that he didn't apply himself more when he had the chance. He learned a trade in the Navy after he graduated high school, and I think he felt fortunate to have found something he enjoyed and was adept at doing (and still does in his retirement). Growing up, my older sister, younger brother, and I often heard funny stories about the trouble Dad got into, but those stories were always paired with the message that an education is very important.

I was not the first of my family to go to college. My sister holds that distinction. I think the initial separation was difficult for her, going to a college where she didn't know anyone. It was different for me. My first experience of going to college was taking a few classes as a McGuffey Scholar at Ohio University during the summer between my junior and senior years of high school, and I did that with a couple friends from school. At this point, I had been thinking of what college I might want to attend after high school, but Ohio University was not a real consideration then. Mostly what I had heard about it was that it was a "party school," and I wanted a "serious" college experience. So I saw that summer as a fun adventure, not an intimidating academic pursuit.

I'm not sure how I was able to attend OU that summer, really. Mom and Dad consider finances a private subject and sheltered my siblings and me from many of the details, but we were aware we didn't have a lot of money. I know things would get tougher when Dad would intermittently get laid off awhile; his employer didn't always have enough work to keep everyone employed all the time. Yet somehow I was able to go.

One of my friends was there only a few days before homesickness had her heading home, and the other made new friends easily and didn't spend as much time with me as I'd expected, so I was on my own more than I expected. But there were always things to do, and it was only for the summer. My tennis class was fun. University Band was really great because I was challenged to learn new music on Tuesday night and perform it on the College Green ("Under the Elms") the following night, and I was surrounded by talented musicians who kept me from getting too lost. My FORTRAN computer programming class was my biggest challenge, and it didn't seem so bad because I was lucky enough to have had computer programming my junior year of high school. FORTRAN seemed like a big improvement over the BASIC I had just learned.

I had decided to study Computer Science in college, thanks to my experiences during my junior and senior years (I learned PASCAL my senior year, which was even better than FORTRAN!). I shopped around for colleges a bit during my senior year, knowing I wanted to go somewhere with a good CS program. My summer "adventure" had started a slow process of reevaluating my idea of what OU had to offer, and I eventually decided OU was where I wanted to go. I started at OU full-time the summer after I graduated high school. I didn't know anyone else at OU that summer, but at least OU itself was now familiar.

I had always enjoyed both the social and academic aspects of school and made good grades. I was encouraged to take college-prep courses in high school, which I think prepared me pretty well academically. I think my high school offered me some excellent opportunities that other schools may not have offered, which may be all the more remarkable for a public school in a rural area. My moral upbringing, with an emphasis on doing the right thing, may have also done a lot to prepare me for doing that which might be considered unpopular or unpleasant and going my own way when it seemed necessary.

I don't remember struggling with college as a whole, though there were a few particular assignments and even a couple classes I remember sweating over. I was driven to finish my degree early. I took classes and worked on campus (via Work Study and then PACE) year-round, taking a fairly heavy course load most of the time. The exception was during the summers, when I lightened my academic load a bit and worked more hours. I was driven because I was in a rush to get married afterward (I was engaged at the time, though we broke it off just before I graduated) but also because and I knew it was a financial burden on my parents. In my mind, there was only the option of success, even down to sticking to the choice of major I made before I started college. I think it gave me enormous comfort to have a plan and not deviate from it because that would lead to having to reconsider all sorts of things. I've never been comfortable

making important decisions because I fear failure (“What if it’s the wrong decision?!”), so once I’ve made one I don’t want to find myself going through the same anguish all over again.

When I graduated, I had squeezed my bachelor’s degree and 2 minors out of exactly 192 hours (including those hours during my “adventure” summer) and finished in less than 3 calendar years. My mom still says I never took any “fun” classes. Though that isn’t entirely true (I actually did enjoy some of those classes), all of my classes counted for something academically. To this day, my big regret of my undergraduate experience was staying so focused on academics and not enjoying more of the variety of other experiences OU had to offer. I don’t regret taking academics seriously, but tempering that with getting more involved in campus life seems like good advice to me. There is more to being well-rounded than academics alone, and that attribute has never been more valuable than it is in today’s world.