

First Generation College Student Narrative:
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I am the first and so far the only college graduate within my immediate and extended family. My motivation for graduating college was my vision to be independent, to succeed, and to have more career opportunities. I did not want to struggle financially as my parents did. My motivation was a hunger for the freedom that education can give.

My mother married when she was a junior in high school and I was born when she was a senior. With 5 children ages 6, 4, 3, & twin 1 year olds, my mother chose to be a stay at home mom while my father worked outside the home. My dad hated school. He dropped out at age 17 to begin working. He eventually landed a good job at the power plants along the Ohio River. Between a couple of mishaps, my father lost his job. We loaded all of our belongings into an old church bus and drove to Texas to start a new life. My dad owned a gas station and body shop and struggled to make ends meet. We lasted there about 2 years before we loaded up the old church bus and came "home". I watched my parents over the next several years' labor to make ends meet. They did everything from logging, to construction, to body shop, to playing in a rock band. They would have moments of wealth and long distances of struggle. I watched how hard they worked and experienced the hardships along with them. Despite my family's lack of financial resources, our family was rich with emotional support. We were disciplined, loved and cared for very well. My parents wanted nothing more than each of us to be successful and respectful. We

were taught to work hard. We worked in the body shop, tended the garden, did the yard work, and helped with the housework. I don't remember a day ever starting in the summer with play. Once all the work was done, we could play all we wanted. We built a lot of our play things from scraps in the garage or used our imagination. Dad was constantly coming up with inventive ideas but constantly stated that no one would take his ideas seriously because he did not graduate from high school. He always told us that we needed to go to college so that we would not have to labor as he did.

From day one in school, I was encouraged to do well. I was an A student until biology class. Mom and dad had a way of getting to me and I never wanted to get less than an A. I will never forget my first B; I had all of the household chores to do for a week that were normally split between the five of us kids. Despite our limited or lack of financial resources, the expectation was that I would go to college. I never questioned it.

Throughout childhood I felt as if I was on the outside looking in. I could see everything that was happening around me, understand what was right and what was wrong and envision my future or how I was going to change things. I did not want to struggle as my parents did. I wanted to prepare myself for whatever life would bring me. I could envision how I wanted to live my life.

When it was time to attend high school, I immediately started on the college prep track. I was not allowed to date until I was 16 and at the time I was not rebel enough to defy my parents wishes. I focused on my schoolwork and spent a lot of time studying as some classes were not easy for me. One particular teacher of mine noticed my love and skill of math and encouraged me to be an engineer. I heard my math teacher say engineers make great money and I said, "deal!" No one else had ever directed me or suggested anything else, and at the time I didn't know to explore or dream of possible career choices.

My parents did not have a penny saved for college. I was accepted at Ohio University and through grants, scholarships, financial aid, living at home and 3 jobs I was able to go. I was a civil engineering major and had dreams of designing bridges one day. I very quickly learned how tough it was to juggle coursework, my jobs, commuting, and ongoing family struggles. I watched a lot of the college kids around me driving new cars, living in dorms or apartments, going on spring break trips or not having to work while they were attending school. But I felt lucky that I was even able to go and proud that I was working for what I wanted. I was not going to let anything stop me from my goal. My grades however tried to. I was put on academic probation after 3 quarters. My engineering academic advisor saw the anguish in my eyes when he told me that I would have to sit out a quarter. I told him I would do whatever it took to stay in school. We discussed my major and discussed other options. He shared with me where to go on campus to explore other majors. I discovered my love of architecture and design and my advisor worked with me to change majors so that I would not miss a single quarter. It was the first time I had ever really spoken with anyone about what I loved and what my options were. I had wished I had thought about it harder before entering school.

I was accepted into the interior architecture / design program and fell in love with space planning, architectural rendering and my professors. One particular professor, Sharran Parkinson, was a great mentor, leader, and educator. I did not want to disappoint her with poor work and worked hard to try to be at the top of the class. I wanted to be as successful in my career as she had been.

I hear a lot of people around me using their childhood experiences as an excuse as to why they act the way they do, or why they couldn't do what they wanted to do. I think I tried to use my experiences as an example and had a vision of how to make things better. Not only did I receive a degree, but I broke out of the bubble I was living in and learned how to explore and achieve my goals. I have enjoyed what I have done with my career so far and have hopes to begin graduate school soon. That will be a first as well.

As a first generation student I feel that I had the emotional support of my family, but I did not know what college was going to be like. My advice to any first generation student would be to try and explore and research what possibilities are out there for you. Find resources or mentors who have been through the process and can give you advice on what you need to know and do. Figure out what it is you really want to do and work hard to get it.