

First Generation College Student Narrative:
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College? I guess I knew what a college was but I didn't really know where one was located and I didn't know anyone who had actually been to one. I would have certainly never anticipated that I would end up working at a college for over 25 years or that 33 years after graduating from high I would be one year away from earning my Ph.D.

The baby of the family and born 19 years after my first sibling, 18 years after the second and 10 years after the third, I grew up in poverty in rural Jackson County, Ohio. The first 17 years of my life were spent without indoor plumbing or running water. The entire house was heated by one small, pot-bellied, coal stove and in the winter you could scratch the ice on the inside of my bedroom window and see the puffs of steam from my mouth with each exhalation. My oldest sister graduated from high school the year I was born and immediately got married and moved to Columbus. My brother dropped out of school and enlisted in the army when he was 17. My youngest sister dropped out of high school and got married when she was 15.

My father had a major heart attack when I was six years old and did not work at a steady paying job for several years. We raised our own cows and pigs for meat and had a huge garden from which we canned food to get us through the winter. The excess crops from the garden were taken into town where my parents set up a "farmer's market" on the street corner. My mom also cleaned houses and did

wall papering jobs to supplement the small amount we received in food stamps and welfare assistance.

I think that because survival was paramount for my parents, education was considered a frivolity. My father left school after the eighth grade and got a job to help support his family. My mother left school after the seventh grade to help stay home and care for her nine younger brothers and sisters. As I mentioned earlier, I am only the second person in our immediate family to graduate from high school. I hated school until I was in the fourth grade. I'm not sure what the turning point was between hating school and finding a refuge in school. Perhaps it was winning the fourth grade spelling bee when I was the only kid in the class who could correctly spell February. Perhaps it was discovering the Bookmobile and the realization that I could go anywhere and be anyone through the adventures of the Bobbsey twins or Louisa May Alcott's Little Women. I do know that school became an escape from my parents and from the world of poverty. Still, college was never a dream or even a consideration. Realistically, I knew I would be lucky to make it through high school, especially after my father died from a massive coronary when I was a freshman. My father's death actually turned out to be the catalyst that provided the means and the opportunity for me to attend college.

Since my father did not have any life insurance and there was no savings account or any source of income except for a small social security check for me, my mother had to seek employment for the first time in her life. At 51 years old she was uneducated and possessed no real work experience or marketable job skills. In desperation, she accepted a job from a family friend and went to work pumping gas at his filling station. Between her job and my social security checks, we were able to survive. Watching my mother struggle to literally keep a roof over our heads and food on the table made a huge impression on a 13-year old. For the first time I realized that education, at least finishing high school, was one way to avoid finding myself in a similar situation. When the gas station closed one year later, the family friend offered my mom a job in his restaurant washing dishes. Since her work hours and days varied and she was seldom home, I found myself alone and on my own most of the time. Fortunately, my junior and senior business education teachers, Miss Roberts and Mrs. York respectively, took me under their wings and kept me focused and in school. Had it not been for those two teachers, I am sure my life story would have turned out much differently.

The second turning point in my life came as a result of my part-time job the summer before my junior year of high school. As part of a work program for disadvantaged youths, I was placed in a job at the Jackson County Sheriff's Office. I became good friends with one of the deputies at the department. Jeff had recently graduated from Hocking Tech with a degree in police science, and when he saw how much I enjoyed police work, encouraged me to pursue an associate's degree from there as well. I cannot imagine what my SAT score was given the fact that I had taken no advanced math, no science classes and only basic English classes. I guess my scores must not have been the worst in the nation, or perhaps Hocking had an open enrollment policy and admitted me in

spite of my scores. At any rate, I enrolled in the police science program at Hocking College and began in the fall of 1975. The money I received each month as a result of my father's death, along with my work-study job as a campus police officer, helped pay my tuition and living expenses. I was on top of the world! I had an apartment with indoor plumbing, I was living in a big city, and I was actually going to college. My family was not supportive of me continuing my education and the first year at Hocking was lonely and fraught with contention as my mother and middle sister urged me to stop all the foolishness, return home, get a job, get married and start having babies. I did extremely well academically and loved my police science courses, especially criministics. I attended Hocking for a little over a year before dropping out of school to move home, get a job, and get married. Instead of marrying a local boy, I married someone from Athens and returned to Athens County to live. I got a job at General Telephone Company as a secretary (which is exactly what my mother always wanted me to be). To my delight, GTE helped defray college expenses and I began to sporadically take secretarial courses at Hocking while working full time and caring for my son.

A third turning point that affected my educational pursuit occurred when I left GTE and began to work at Ohio University in January 1983. My exposure to the academic environment fueled my desire for knowledge and I was determined to complete a college degree. I finished my associate's degree at Hocking in 1992 (17 years after first enrolling) and subsequently enrolled in OU's University College until I could decide on a major. A close friend of mine had recently returned to Ohio University to complete his Ph.D. in Interpersonal Communication and Mark suggested I consider transferring into the School of Interpersonal Communication (now COMS). I finally took Mark's advice and earned my bachelor's degree in organizational communication in 1995—twenty years after first beginning college and while working full time and raising a family. I would be remiss if I did not give thanks and recognition to the faculty members in the School who believed in my potential and who encouraged me every step of the way. David Descutner, Roger Aden, Claudia Hale, Sue DeWine, Tom Daniels, Anita James, and Lynn Harter are just a few of the faculty who were, and who continue to be, instrumental in helping me to stay motivated and focused. I went on to earn my master's degree from the school in 1999 and enrolled in the Ph.D. program in interpersonal communication in 2000. If all goes well, I will complete my dissertation by June 2009.