

**First Generation College Student Narrative:**  
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I was the last of five children of a father who graduated from high school and a mother who finished eighth grade. My father kept the books for a coal company in southwestern Pennsylvania and then moved us, when I was eight, to a steel town on the Ohio River near Pittsburgh where he worked for the mill in a similar capacity. My mother, who was very smart, witty, and articulate, taught me to read at 4, and I got up early in the morning with her as she ironed and cooked and read to me and with me. My father loved to read everything from history to novels to nonfiction, and was also very intelligent and articulate. He loved education and made sure that we all knew that we had to finish high school. Two of my two older sisters went to work as secretaries in local companies after graduating from high school, and my older brother went straight into the army. My other older sister went to a two-year nursing school in Pittsburgh and, upon graduation, began a career as a nurse in a city hospital.

I enjoyed school although I was very small for my age and subject to good-natured abuse. Nobody among my friends talked about going to college, and my teachers, as dedicated as they were, did not much discuss college either. All the fellows I knew were planning to work in the mill, and very few of the girls were inclined to go to college. I took the SAT as a junior along with four of my friends because it was cheap and convenient, and I had my scores sent to five colleges. I heard from all five colleges, but still did not think seriously about continuing my education past high school.

By tenth grade I was playing competitive tournament tennis in Pennsylvania and Ohio, meeting lots of young people my age who talked eagerly about “going away to school.” I was intrigued but knew that my family could not afford to send me. One afternoon at the local tennis courts I encountered Gary Perkins, who was then an assistant dean at Slippery Rock State College. Gary was a local legend as a high school basketball player who had received an athletic scholarship and had gone on to earn a master’s degree in education. He asked me if I was going to college and if I planned to try to win an athletic scholarship. I told him I had given it little thought, and he volunteered to set up a try-out at Slippery Rock. I drove up to Slippery Rock, played several sets with fellows on the team, and received a modest scholarship offer. My father was very happy and encouraged me to go there in the fall, and he even helped me secure a loan for the difference between the costs of the first year and the scholarship. So, off to Slippery Rock I went, unprepared emotionally but ready for the experience.

I had a very difficult first year personally and academically. I was asked to leave the residence hall at the three-week mark of the first semester because I refused to tell on my friends who were responsible for a dangerous prank in which I was not involved. Classes were much more challenging than I had guessed, and my attendance was spotty. The tennis coach was a martinet who did not like my attitude, and campus seemed really boring compared to my hometown. I ended my first semester with a 2.35, with a deteriorating relationship with the coach, and little interest in returning.

Fortunately, I was rescued by two professors in winter semester. My French professor and my history professor took a genuine interest in me and began advising me in ways that I had spurned before. They both told me to quit tennis after the spring season and to get involved in college life. They did not put up with my jive attitude and mandated that I take myself and my potential seriously. I began to listen to them and to follow their advice, and they encouraged me to take pride in good grades. They also encouraged me to join the debate team, and at my first debate tournament I met many folks my age who were hip and smart and serious students. I did not tell the tennis coach, for obvious reasons, and soon enough I was hooked on debate. At the end of the season, I quit the team with the knowledge that I was going to be able to pay for school by working all summer in the mill. I raised my GPA to a 2.9, enjoyed my classes, and suddenly felt as if a door had opened through which I walked and never looked back.