

**First Generation College Student Narrative:**  
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I was the first generation in my immediate family to attend college, although five of my father's younger six siblings are college graduates, two with doctorates of divinity. Both of my parents grew up on tobacco farms in North Carolina, and neither completed high school. Being the oldest, my dad dropped out to help with his younger brothers and sisters. Both of their families had very limited resources. My mother literally grew up in a log cabin – with a few additions and an outhouse. Although she did not complete school herself, she had been strongly influenced by the teacher in her one room school. Consequently, she had great educational ambitions for her children. Both she and my father read constantly and attempted to instill a love of reading and books in both of us. The freely discussed political issues in front of us and encouraged us to form our own opinions. They voted in all elections, and Mama was a poll worker.

My brother, who was ten years older than I, was dyslexic and had lazy eye before either condition was recognized generally. Those obstacles were compounded when his elementary teachers insisted on forcing this left-handed boy to write with his right hand. Consequently, he did not approach reading or educational attainment with enthusiasm. He was quite skilled in math, so he became a fire fighter upon finally finishing high school – at age 21. He could calculate in his head the volumes and velocities of water through various fire hoses!

I was more the material our mother had in mind. I learned to read sitting in my father's lap as he read the Sunday comics to me, tracing the words with his finger. By second grade, I was reading at the high school level according to achievement tests. For a variety of reasons, I became shy and socially withdrawn and focused primarily on the world of books. I would check out as many library books as I could carry during the summer. Over the years, several teachers focused on me and gave me considerable encouragement. I found out much later that my mother had talked with many of them, asking them to not tell me that my scores were a big deal but to keep me busy and not allow me to become bored. They certainly did that! One high school teacher, in particular, became a friend and mentor. We spent a lot of time together laying out the school newspaper and she encouraged me to follow my heart and my dreams – and not to give up. She instilled the idea that, if I became a good writer—communicate well in writing –I could excel in almost any field.

Getting admitted to college was no problem; paying for college was a challenge. My mother attempted to work to earn money for my education, but both times she quit due to illness and surgery, with medical bills taking what she had earned. When I was 15, I got a hardship work permit and began holiday work in department store sales. After the first year, the department store kept me working year-round on weekends. I applied to the university in my hometown so I could be a commuter student. The first summer after high school graduation, I began working summers in a bookbindery during the week, in addition to the department store sales on weekends. The man responsible for the summer student work crews certainly had a challenging job. He was a true artisan, with a specialty in restoring old Bibles. In summers, he oversaw us as we rebound school textbooks for the state of North Carolina. I felt very privileged when he shared his restoration projects, revealing his deep commitment to and pride in his work. I learned to commit to the job at hand, take an interest and do the best I could, regardless of what it was.

Freshman year was difficult. My faculty advisor also taught introduction to Western European History. He proudly announced that ALL freshmen failed his first test and took delight in terrorizing us. I also could not bring myself to pith frogs, so nearly failed biology. Finally, I took swimming for a required physical education class and tended to sink frequently. The commute could be a challenge. I drove my parent's car as Daddy drove a company truck. The brake line had a leak, so I often coasted to the curb and pulled up the floor rug to access the fill spout and add fluid. The clutch linkages kept sticking in high gear, causing a lot of yanking under the hood. Then, there was the challenge of putting chains on the tires while parallel parked in a snowstorm! Somehow, I stuck to it and found my stride in upper class years.

At the start of my sophomore year, I was also able to gain university employment at the switchboard two evenings a week. The job entailed directing all incoming telephone calls to the campus and serving as radio dispatcher for university security. The director of the switchboard operation was a tiny woman who treated all of us like extensions of her family. From then on, I had another cheerleader. She celebrated all of our successes and commiserated with our

challenges. When she had to have surgery one summer, she placed the entire responsibility in my hands. I grew up fast when I had to fire a fellow student for abandoning her post without notifying anyone. I also got to know the security personnel quite well as they gave me rides after hours. The deputy chief, in particular, was another cheerleader for all of us. We could unload our troubles with no possibility of being laughed at or having our stories repeated.

With a small tuition scholarship from the alumnae association, I was able to pay my way through college – and move on campus in the middle of my sophomore year. At that time, moving ON campus was a move TOWARD independence.

In junior year, I discovered that my life-long dream (to that point) was no longer desirable as a target profession. Once again, faculty mentors stepped in to help. One, in particular, encouraged me in my desire to pursue regional planning. My GPA was not the greatest, although my GRE scores were good. He personally intervened with the graduate schools I was considering, explaining that my grades were low because of how many hours I worked while in school. Because of his help, I was able to obtain a full teaching assistantship for graduate school in Illinois. He also gave me my first job as an instructor when I finished.

In summary, I am continually grateful to the wise encouragement from my parents and the timely mentoring from teachers, faculty, staff and employers. Had they not been there, I would not have made it. I also never lost the notion that, if I kept trying, there would be a way. I learned to be flexible and expect the unexpected. Life rarely follows our plans; it often has something much more interesting in mind. I also learned never to be bored!