

First Generation College Student Narrative:
Mary Patacca



Director, Portfolio Management Office

My parents were Italian immigrants. They were the sort who came to America with only a thin dime and even thinner clothes on their backs. Mom had finished middle school; Dad had gotten no farther than grade school. They were both sharply intelligent - as smart as anyone I've yet to meet. But, up to the day they died, I could never make them believe or understand that. So they seemed more than a little amazed by, and even a little afraid of, the academic excellence being achieved by their four daughters as we wound our way through the Catholic school system in Columbus. One after the other, just as blissful as ignorance can be, we pushed our short little dark-haired selves forward, staying always at, or near, the top of our classes.

My older sister decided to go straight into the workforce after high school, which left me, as the second child, very much at sea, when I decided to go to college. I navigated the application and financial aid maze feeling very much alone, though I suppose high school counselors or more savvy friends and their parents might have helped me more than they did - if I had let them. But as the still-insulated child of immigrants, I was both distrustful of the general American public, and embarrassed by what I believed to be an ignorance that was now becoming more suffocating, than blissful.

But I did it. I applied for college. It was not so much out of a sense of vocation, or a burning desire for higher education. Maybe it was that I was female and this was the early 70s, or maybe it was that I was so intensely shy in high school that I was nearly unapproachable on any remotely personal topic. But whatever it

was, despite my high grades, no one, at school or at home or anywhere at all, encouraged me to go to college. I applied to college mostly because school was a familiar place where I excelled, and I didn't feel ready to step out fully into a wide American landscape that still felt half-foreign to me.

So I filled out forms; I got my hesitant parents to sign them. That they were worried for me was apparent in the way they flip-flopped that summer after high school: They were plainly proud one moment, as they bragged to relatives about their scholarship-recipient, college-bound daughter. The next moment, they would wonder aloud to me why I might not find work instead - or even better yet, find a husband.

My first time out, I flopped. Attracted by the fact that a friend of my older sister was already attending, and by a scholarship offer, I had chosen a small, exclusive college. But my teeny-tiny wardrobe, my absolute dearth of spending money, my narrow experience, and my immigrant background soon made me feel horribly out-of-place. I also lacked the maturity, I lacked the drive, I lacked the inner confidence, and I lacked the strong external support that I would have needed, at the time. I quit college after a year and a half. Then, in rapid succession, life dealt me these cards:

- I married, I helped my husband through college, and he found a job in Cincinnati. The plan was for him to return the favor and help me through college, now that I felt more prepared.
- The recession hit and he was laid off before I could start at UC, where I had applied. I went back to work – it was to be temporary.
- I got pregnant - surprise!
- We had a beautiful son and named him Vincent.
- My husband died of a sudden illness, when Vince was under a month old.
- I left everything in Cincinnati behind, and Vince and I moved back to my parents' modest home in Columbus.

It took some time to stand back up onto my own two feet, but after a few months, I found a part time job, and began the slow process of re-orienting myself. Then, approximately a year after I had moved back home, Dad died, after a brief illness. I was now 26 years old.

As we struggled back to our feet after a second terrific blow, Mom kept saying it, for both our sakes: Coraggio (core-ad-joe: courage). Coraggio. We continued forward. And the next year, after some research and after talking to friends and social workers - after seeking outside help and advice in a way I had never been able to do before - I announced to Mom that I was planning to attend the Ohio State University, to obtain a Bachelor's of Science degree in Chemical Engineering.

Well – hmmm. Maybe that was a little too much coraggio. Mom's feelings were not so mixed this time. She thought I was crazy, and she said so. Engineering advisors at Ohio State, though they weren't quite so blunt (or Italian) in their wording, seemed to agree with Mom, underneath it all:

“Chemical Engineering is a really a bear,” said one, “and the program isn’t designed to do part time, or with stopping and starting.”

“We’ve never had a single parent come through the program, that I can remember,” said another. “You do realize this is probably the most challenging undergraduate degree you can get here, don’t you?”

Yes, I did realize that. That’s what made it sound like such a sure thing, and I was looking for a very, very sure thing. I was determined in a way I can only describe as obsessive. I was determined to acquire something permanent and secure. Chemical Engineering degrees don’t lie, and they don’t die, ever, until you do. Perfect.

So maybe I was crazy, a little. But, listen up! Here’s what every child of immigrants needs to hear: This is where having impoverished immigrant parents gives you the leg up. Who knew? Not only did I inherit the genes for smarts, I inherited the genes for taking a big breath, and doing something absolutely crazy - almost as crazy as crossing the fearsome Atlantic Ocean with very little education, close to nothing in your pocket, and absolutely no grasp of English. Almost.

See, Mom? You had no room to talk. But you had a heart big enough to help me despite your misgivings. You helped me care for Vincent while I worked and went to school. You understood soon enough that I was doing what I needed to do, and you always said “coraggio,” just when I needed it most. How many times did I almost quit? I don’t remember, either. And when I got my college degree, at the age of 32, I was the first in our family to do so. And you were there with Vincent, sitting in Ohio Stadium in the pouring rain, watching me walk the walk.

So to all first-generation college students I say this: Appreciate your family for what they have given you, and can give you. Reach outside the family for help, as needed. It’s not disloyal; it’s necessary. Don’t listen to naysayers, or to your own, very normal, fears. Seek out those who’ll provide support and encouragement. Choose a college where you feel comfortable. For me, I loved the breathtaking diversity and anonymity provided by a large, state-funded university like OSU. For you, it may be different. But have faith in yourself, and trust in others. Inside you, you have everything you need. Take a big breath and take it day-by-day. If at first you don’t succeed, try again. Do not give up. Coraggio!