

First Generation College Student Narrative:
Julie Suhr



Psychology Professor

I come from a mid-western dairy farm family. My father, who was also raised on a farm, was the middle child of 13 children and in fact attended a one-room schoolhouse until high school, when he finally attended "real school." Interestingly, for some years my grandmother was the teacher of the one room school, with most of the pupils her own children - so in a sense he was home schooled. Of my father's many siblings, only the two youngest attended any college. My mother also graduated from high school, as did her six siblings, but none attended any college. Thus, although my parents were supportive of the idea of college for their 4 children, they did not have any experience or knowledge to help us when we applied to college or for helping us succeed once we got there.

Living on a farm in the 1980s, when land prices were lower than the loans taken out to buy the land years before, was a financially risky time, and when I was close to college age (to be followed by two brothers in the next two years) my parents were very worried about paying for college (and even more worried about keeping the farm). I distinctly remember my father and I sitting at the kitchen table trying to go through financial aid forms. At one point he looked up at me and said, "Well, the bad news is that we may lose the farm but the good news is that we are so broke that they say I don't have to pay a dime for you to go to school!" Of course someone had to pay something, and so my many scholarships, work study jobs, and loans that I spent the next decade paying off

allowed me to reach my goal. Years later, after my dad had retired from dairy farming due to his health, he took a night job as a custodian at the college I had attended. He learned that, as an employee of the college, he would have been able to provide his children with free tuition at the college, and he bemoaned this information that came way too late for all of his children.

I adored school from the early elementary years on and never personally doubted that I would attend college or that I would excel there - except once. Unfortunately my high school guidance counselor was not supportive of me attending a 4-year school. When I met with him to review my post-high school plans, he felt that my "background" would indicate that I should attend a community college. Although I was one of the top 10 graduates of my high school class, he had difficulty seeing past my socioeconomic status and my parent's education level; he felt that I would not likely succeed in a college setting. What he couldn't see was my abilities, my motivation, my drive, and the support I had from my parents to attend college. Thus, neither my parents nor my guidance counselor were helpful in helping to decide on a college and in preparing myself financially to attend. Ultimately I chose to attend a small liberal arts college close to home that offered me good scholarships and that had a strong drama department. This decision was largely due to the influence of my favorite high school teacher, who was the drama coach, because it was clear to me that if I was someday going to be just like her, I would need to attend college and major in education and theater arts. I guess that explains why I am a neuropsychologist today...

From the get go, I felt different from the other students at college. Because it was a small private school, most students who attended came from families with better financial means, and many were also children of alums, thus having a family tie with the college directly. I remember going to the registrar's office with a friend during the spring semester of my freshman year. While I filled out some more financial aid forms, she handed over a check for the full semester's tuition; I had never seen so many numbers on a check before. My freshman year roommates had financial resources that allowed them to go to college without having to work, and it was frustrating to me to spend so many hours a week working instead of applying myself to my studies. It was also difficult at times to forgo all the little pleasures like ordering pizza, going out for dinner or the movies on the weekends, or going on weekend shopping trips to the city with friends, because all my finances were devoted to eking out a living while attending school. But work-study allowed me to meet other students in my same situation and we were all good supports for each other, covering shifts in the cafeteria for each other when someone had a test, and being each other's sounding board when we became worried about being able to stay in school semester after semester.

My favorite story of my first generation status, though, is from the beginning of the second semester of my freshman year. By then I was confident that I was going to be able to handle a college curriculum, I had already discovered that I was NOT going to major in theater but had found my true passion, psychology, and I had decided that I could attend college in the summer and work in the

dormitories to pay for it, which in addition to helping me financially also kept me from having to do farm chores - except during hay baling season. In the first week of the second semester I received two letters in my campus mailbox, both from the Study Skills Center. The one I opened first said that, because of my good grades in the first semester, I could apply to work as a tutor in my sophomore year for my work-study placement. "Woo hoo! No more cafeteria work!" I thought, and I carefully examined the letter to see how to apply, what the interview process was like, etc. The second letter said that, because of my status as a first generation college student and because of my family's financial background, I qualified for.....free tutoring. It was fun to attend my job interview and inquire whether they wanted me to be a tutor or to get tutoring. I worked for years in the Study Skills Center, and I appreciated the extra support they offered to students who came from backgrounds that did not prepare them for college. As it turned out, although I did not need free tutoring, I did in fact meet some great mentors at the Center who were able to offer me advice about courses, about other campus resources for those with financial need, etc. They, along with my academic advisors in my two majors (psychology and German), were my best resources for how to succeed in college and how to apply to graduate school once I made the decision to continue my education post college.