

First Generation College Student Narrative:
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My mother graduated from high school in 1927. Following elementary school my father attended trade school. Mom was a mom – the best one ever! Dad was with Cincinnati Gas & Electric Co. for over forty years where he worked his way from meter reader to collections department special investigator. Both mom and dad instilled strong work ethics in my two brothers, two sisters and me. Each of my parents had varied interests that sparked much of the same in my siblings and me. Books were accessible from as young an age as I can recall. As a teenager, the one way I knew I could get permission to leave the house was to make my destination the library. Music, of every genre, was always in the background. And, above all they never stifled our curiosity. We explored and experimented. Any kind of animal was welcomed, as long we learned how to care for it. My father saw potentially dangerous playthings as opportunities for lessons in how to safely use or do something. We had access to tools. Fires were started. Explosions happened.

My siblings and I attended parochial schools. That we would attend high school was an unspoken matter of fact. Anything beyond that was never mentioned. I entered our all girls high school in 1959. Each of us was tested prior to matriculation and I was placed in the Advanced College Preparatory track, the equivalent of today's Advance Placement. From that point until the beginning of my senior year, my educational/career plans were never again mentioned, either at home or school. I was never actually 'prepared' for anything. However, since

I was in the 'college preparatory' track, I thought I was going to college. The first time I saw an academic counselor was at the beginning of my senior year. All she said to me was "Where are you going to college?" I went home to ask mom and dad.

My parents lived through the Great Depression. As with many Americans, it left an indelible mark on the way they lived their lives. They were practical, frugal, no economical-nonsense people. It was also 1962. The Feminine Mystique wouldn't be published until 1963. Fulfillment for women had not yet moved out of the home. In all of my naivety I asked, "Where will I go to college?" I can't blame my parents for the chuckles that accompanied their answer, one that paraphrases to 'we can't afford college and, besides, you're a girl – you'll marry and have children.' I can blame my high school. When I returned saying my parents couldn't afford college, they said, "OK." And that's all they said. No one mentioned scholarships. No one mentioned loans. No one mentioned working to pay for school. I did an about-face. I dropped my fourth year of math and picked up a typing class. I was going to need some kind of skill to help me get a job. I graduated high school, married and used my math skills to work as an actuarial clerk and a business manager. However, the craving for education and a degree gnawed at the back of my being. Eventually circumstances allowed me to dip my toes into the pool of education.

In high school I hovered between first and second honors. I did my best, but no one ever really taught me how to be a great student. I thought I was average. So, my expectations were low when I began college. I was a thirty-four year old woman who knew she couldn't compete with the 18 year olds. I suppose that's why I cried after taking my first exam. It wasn't because I'd done poorly. It was because I got 100%. Maybe I could have done this on my own but a program for non-traditional age students at my college really helped. The first course taken by returning students there was one that provided help with note-taking and study techniques, math review, library research skills and intelligence and interest tests. Every professor I had was very supportive and encouraged me tremendously. I took one natural science course from an enthusiastic chemistry professor and knew that science was where I should be.

I wish I could say it was a freight train to academic success after that. It wasn't. I ran out of money after nearly two years of taking classes. I managed to finish an associates degree and went back to work. Ten years later, burned out completely on business I set my sights on a biology degree. This time I promised myself that I would take it the entire way. At age forty-four I returned to college and declared my biology major. This time I found that not only was I cut out for the academic life, I also had a great rapport with the younger students. Real life experience contributed tremendously to my success. It was so much easier to learn because I had something to which I could 'attach' new information. Everything is meaningful to someone who has had time in the 'real world'. My experiences were also an inspiration to the traditional students with whom I was learning. I also worked very hard. This opportunity was a long time coming and I valued it highly.

I finished my degree, graduated summa cum laude and went straight to graduate school. I completed my doctorate at age fifty-three. As a graduate teaching assistant I discovered that I am a natural teacher. My fortune now is to spend my time teaching my favorite topics in biology to the young people with whom I got along so well. I learned so much from the fantastic professors I had in undergraduate school. They buoyed me when my confidence was low. Their dedication spurred me to investigate how we learn science and to investigate techniques to use in my classes. I found my passion in the lab and the classroom!

I encourage every student to use the resources of their university, college, department and individual professors and other students. I could not be where I am today without using every possible bit of help I could find. I hope that my story is an inspiration to someone, somewhere, who thinks that there isn't enough time to achieve what one wants. Sometimes my students ask me if I have any advice for them. I always tell them two things. First of all, life is a lot shorter than you think it is. Be sure that you do something you love every day! And, second, life is a lot longer than you think it will be. If you don't like what you're doing, there is time to make a change, no matter how long it takes to do it! I am proof of this.