

Reflections of a First Generation Admission Dean

By Paul Marthers

Because my parents do not have college degrees, when I crossed the commencement stage diploma in hand in 1982, I joined the ranks of first-generation college graduates. Now somewhat paradoxically, this first-generation college graduate happens to work as the *de facto* gatekeeper for a college in the elite milieu of private higher education that rarely welcomed people like me through the gates at an earlier time in this nation's history.

Each year when I read applications from aspiring college freshmen, I try to remember from whence I came. I try to imagine myself back when I was enthralled with the possibilities available through the simple, yet seemingly risky, act of stepping up to college, when doing so was a hope far from a certainty. The story of how I got to college may illuminate some of the challenges first-generation students face and underscore the critical need for selective colleges to continue to provide access to students from across the economic spectrum. The story that follows is just one first generation tale among many.

No one in several generations of my mother's family, 19th century Polish immigrants turned small farmers in the fertile Connecticut River Valley just south of Middletown, attended college. Just getting through high school was an accomplishment. To my mother college was expensive and only made sense if going would open doors to a good job. She understood the idea of attending college for business (my initial major choice) or engineering (the major she hoped I would choose), but to her liberal arts majors, such as English and history, meant preparation to teach English or history, or worse yet a well-educated unemployed son living at home past the age of twenty five. I could have avoided incurring student loans if I had a dollar for every time my mother asked me what in the name of God I was going to do with a major like English, which was my eventual choice after stints in business, economics and psychology. Each major change looked less practical to her. So to keep her blood pressure down, I eventually stopped telling her.

My father had a fuller context regarding college. He had grown up across the street from Wesleyan University (CT), where his grandfather, who lived next door, worked in the maintenance department, tending to the science buildings. My father's mother worked as a cook in the Wesleyan cafeteria.

But for my father, the prospect of attending Wesleyan was not a simple crossing of the street, as it was for his best friend who lived in the prosperous cul-de-sac up the hill, aptly named Huber Manor. That friend, whose father owned a shoe store, went to Wesleyan and eventually became a successful attorney. My father was admitted to the University of Connecticut but could not afford it, and like many men in the early 1950's, was drafted into the Korean War. Despite having the GI bill benefit upon discharge, he got married, had kids, and began working his way up from the mailroom in a Middletown bank.

In the late 1960's, while raising four young children, my father started taking classes in the evenings at Quinnipiac College (CT). He did so for almost two years, making the Dean's list consistently. A promotion to bank manager rendered college less necessary. Bills from my mother's hospitalization for a brain operation made college unaffordable. He withdrew and never returned.

By the time I was approaching college, it was clear that in my father's field, he was a vanishing breed—a bank manager lacking a college degree. The glass ceiling hanging over his head was increasingly apparent. Around our house, “college” became a curse word, as in “those damned college guys always get the promotions, cushy jobs, boss's favoritism, better salaries,” etc.

So we moved to Vermont where my father took a job at a bank that valued experience as much as a college degree (at least until that bank was bought out by a huge Boston bank and all the non-college dinosaurs like my father were early retired).

In Vermont, I quit the varsity baseball team junior year to take a job at a cheese factory. “You'll work the rest of your life, but you'll only have this one chance to play high school baseball,” warned my drafting teacher. I have since realized he was right. Yet I knew that if I wanted to keep college a viable possibility, I would have to find a way to pay for it. My parents, despite wanting the best future for their children, could not afford college. My father's salary, which supported a family of six, was approximately what I earned in my second year as an admission counselor. Working after school was a necessity.

The fact that I was planning to finish high school and was even considering college made me the “college boy” to my coworkers on the cheese crew, guys who had dropped out of junior high, just been released from prison, or returned from the Vietnam War with a need to anaesthetize against painful memories of the kind since popularized by movies like *Platoon*. There was even one huge menacing guy, who unloaded milk trucks and told my foreman that he didn't like the look of me and was waiting for me to turn 18 so he could, in his words, “squeeze my neck until my head popped off.” Aside from that one threat, which I took especially seriously the day I had to climb into a milk tank to hose it out, while Mr. Menace stood close enough to seal the tank's porthole, most of the ribbing I received was friendly. But the implication was clear: no matter how well I spoke the language of hot cars, made the f-word my favorite adjective and feigned interest in deer hunting, I was not one of them. And quite honestly, and I say this at the risk of sounding haughty, I was deathly afraid of the downward mobility that a career in the cheese factory represented, not to mention the prospect of still working there on my 18th birthday.

The 15 months I spent toiling for minimum wage alongside guys whose only chance at a decent paycheck was through 60-hour weeks and the wonders of time-and-a-half, sharpened my motivation to get to college and move up the proverbial economic ladder. I wish I could say that the rest of my story is the classic hard work leads to success tale. It's not quite that.

Yes, I did eventually graduate from the respected Oberlin College (OH), thanks to the institution's generosity and the financial aid largesse of the Vermont Student Assistance Corporation. In doing so, I became the first and only member of my family to earn a four-year degree. But along the way to that accomplishment, I stepped into some deep potholes.

For one, my high school transcript made me far from Oberlin material. All those hours working at the cheese factory diverted me from the honor roll path I had trod in Connecticut. I did the bare minimum in classes, finishing in the second quintile at Champlain Valley Union High School, which in my day had as many future farm boys as college boys. I blame no one but myself for my mediocre record. My energies were focused more on my after school job and my dented 1969 Dodge Charger than on taking AP classes or going to college-related meetings. I never went to a college fair or presentation in high school. That's right, this future admission officer, who is now working toward a doctorate, never talked to a college representative, never had an interview, and never went to see his guidance counselor about college until the winter of senior year. Then the conversation was brief: "Uh, can I get in anywhere?"

You may be wondering why I siphoned earnings away from college savings to purchase a car. The answer is simple and one I suspect other lower income first-generation college graduates know all too well. Having a job to earn money costs money. I needed a car to get to my job. My parents couldn't buy me one and weren't about to play favorites by letting me, nor any one of my three siblings, use the family car. The rule was: if you want a car, you buy one for yourself.

My college options were limited to the local schools within commuting distance that would admit a 2nd-quintile student with a declining record. Paying tuition out of my own pocket looked doable. Room and board was out of the question. Fortunately, Saint Michael's College (VT) near Burlington smiled upon me. I left the cheese factory for a part-time job at a grocery store alongside other local college kids living at home. Embarrassed by my downward slide in high school, I vowed to do much better in college and quickly returned to being the disciplined, high-achieving student I had been before moving to Vermont.

The fact that I left Saint Michael's for Oberlin had everything to do with my awakening to the wider world of college options (rather than to any deficits I found in my first institution). I began hearing a nagging inner voice say, "You're not that smart: there must be more rigorous colleges where you won't get A's." I was also growing increasingly envious of the residential experience many of my friends were having away at college.

Serendipity appeared in the form of a girlfriend's mother. Mrs. S, a seven sisters alumna, was sending her daughter, Margaret, off to Earlham College (IN). What was more surprising than learning about this heretofore unknown universe of colleges that included Earlham was the fact that Margaret was receiving a huge financial aid package and had been offered similar generous packages by her other college choices.

One the day Mrs. S met me, she handed me a dog-eared copy of the *Yale Daily News' Insider's Guide to the Colleges*, saying, "Read this, you can do better." She also directed me to look beyond New England at colleges in her native Midwest. Carleton (MN), Grinnell (IA), Macalester (MN), and Oberlin (the only one of the four I had ever heard of) were good choices for me in her estimation. Mrs. S. became a controversial, argument-spurring figure with my parents. They kept advising me to stay at home, avoid loan debt, save money. Mrs. S., they thought, was just setting me up for huge rejections or, almost worse, acceptances from schools I could not afford.

I understood my parents' point of view, but didn't let it become my own. The *Insider's Guide* became my Bible. I read it cover to cover and wrote away for catalogs from nearly every college east of Colorado. As a result, I had in my bedroom a college and career planning center similar to those I now visit on high school recruiting trips. When I would read a course catalog, I would often conclude that I should attend that college. Maybe that's way I have worked at and attended so many colleges (12 so far) and frequently stop at campuses even when on vacation—fortunately, my wife indulges this interest.

Then, as now, the small colleges spoke most directly to my learning style. I narrowed down the choice finally selecting Oberlin. At that point, where I went didn't matter so much as having the opportunity to go to an outstanding college to have a life-transforming experience that I never thought was a realistic possibility for someone like me.

That transforming experience is why I work at a college, rather than in a corporate office, hospital, factory, or store. I love college campuses: they are sublime spaces like cathedrals, museums, and concert halls. I still remind myself how lucky I am to work on a college campus—a place alive with ideas, where the power of one's intellect trumps the amount in one's wallet—at least most of the time, where each year a new cohort of first-generation students gets the kind of extraordinary educational opportunities I was so fortunate to receive.

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