

Chapter 2

A Forever Student Navigating Higher Education: Reflections of a First Generation Scholar

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reflects upon the author's first-generation student status and her transition to higher education after 22 years in a secondary ELA classroom. It recognizes the obstacles faced by first-generation students and how the twists and turns in navigating higher education impacts a career and scholarly life. It also reflects upon her graduate work in English (Composition and Rhetoric) emphasizing how doctoral work while teaching secondary full-time informed her secondary classroom, and then, conversely, how her secondary ELA career informed her instruction of pre-service teachers and in-service teachers in her ELA methods courses. It also emphasizes how her non-traditional status also shaped who she became as a professor of English who understands first-generation students' needs and advocates for more first-generation faculty in higher education because they bring a wealth of lived experience that truly benefits all learners in higher education, but specifically other first-generation students.

FIRST GENERATION CHALLENGES

If my Silver Creek, Nebraska high school class of 23 students had compiled a list of “mostly like to...” I am the student who would have been named “most likely to remain a forever student.” I loved school. This love was noticed by my teachers. As a sophomore in high school, I registered for business courses, but my high school principal/guidance counselor, Mr. Cremers, scratched those off my registration card, and said, “Cathie, you need to take trigonometry and advanced algebra. You need to go to college.” My oldest brother had gone to college in Omaha, Nebraska in 1973. After one semester, he returned home because he couldn't balance football practice, classes, and working full-time at a pizza joint. This was my only model for college attendance. My brother was a very good student, so if he couldn't do it, how could I? Mr. Cremers persisted throughout high school that I was capable of college studies, but I had doubts.

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A Forever Student Navigating Higher Education

My father epitomized the working-class mentality of the 1970s and 1980s; he would continually ask, “Why do you need a college education? You can get a job at one of the factories and make a decent living.” Most adolescents in my small Nebraska town did just that. Some went on to community college to receive further training or fine-tune some specific skills, but the vast majority stuck around and followed in their parents’ footsteps. I told my father I loved learning and had a lot of encouragement from Mr. Cremers and Miss Sjogren, a new teacher, who believed in my ability to succeed in college.

In 1978, my senior year, the feminist revolution hadn’t caught up to rural Nebraska and a village of 480, so only two females considered taking the ACT—me and Sharon Slusarski who wanted to study genetics. At the time, I wanted to become an interior designer. Silver Creek High School had the good fortune of recruiting a lovely young woman, Miss Sue Sjogren, a recent graduate of Texas Christian University (TCU), as a teacher of biology and home economics. As an older sibling in a large family of 11 siblings, I was already familiar with cooking, baking, and sewing, but interior design intrigued me. I liked the creativity of it and the ability to express something about myself through art and design. I was the first girl in my high school to enroll in a drafting class. I enrolled because I wanted to understand wall elevations and architectural drawings.

Miss Sjogren had the greatest impact upon my decision to apply for college. She saw potential in my drawings. I spent hours drawing pictures of women in clothes in colors and designs of my choice. I scoured old Butterick and Simplicity pattern books. She introduced me to interior design—fashioning a home or other spaces. Miss Sjogren suggested I apply to a design school in California and helped me put together a portfolio. She also suggested I apply to the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) because they had an excellent Textile and Design program, and it was closer to home. She encouraged me to apply for the Merrick County UN-L Extension Scholarship.

Since I had early release from school during my senior year, I worked at a café, so my job and homework consumed much of my time. I completed my college and scholarship applications as well as the ACT as close to the deadline as was acceptable. It was understood in our home that anything that wasn’t considered essential like food or clothing, was our responsibility. I scrimped and saved my waitressing wages to pay for the two college applications and the ACT. I did nothing to prepare for the ACT. My high school boyfriend drove me to the nearby community college where I took the test. There may have been a meeting for parents and students to receive guidance, but I don’t recall any meeting. I was waitressing and my parents’ work hours would have prohibited their attendance anyway. I did score well enough to get accepted into the university, and I did earn the UN-L Extension scholarship of \$100. The Extension Scholarship was for students studying on UN-L’s East Campus, or the College of Agriculture, where at the time, home economics and textile and design were housed. I completed the application and wrote an essay about how much I loved art and wanted to be an interior designer. I was proud to have won the scholarship over many other applicants from larger communities in the county. My dad scoffed at that with the words, “if they had given you a \$1,000 that would be something.”

I graduated high school in May 1978 and spent the summer working in a factory in nearby Columbus, living with my sister and her husband and walking to their home at 1:00 a.m. after the 4:00-1:00 graveyard shift. This was at a time when I didn’t feel unsafe doing so, but in hindsight, it was a terrible idea. Alas, I had no transportation, and I was saving money for my first year at the university. Over the summer I met my future husband, and he took me to the campus in mid-August.

It happened to be the first year in many years that the campus saw a huge increase in newly matriculated students; therefore, the university didn’t have enough campus housing. I was stuck in the common room of a dormitory with six other girls on the fourth floor. It wasn’t that I wasn’t accustomed to this

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