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A Sold-Out Game: Barriers to Postsecondary Education for First-Generation Non-Traditional Students

It was a packed house. Oh, there were open seats, but as is so often the case they were between two other strangers and so given the choice between standing or inconveniencing strangers, most chose to hold up the wall. You would think with that many bodies burning calories and being mid-day in June, the room would be warm, but the temperature never quite rose above subarctic, and I was grateful I brought a sweater. I tried to shrink myself inside of it, to conserve warmth and as a futile attempt at making myself less visible.

A charming parade of young women dressed in matching black polos tripped enthusiastically down the ramp and arrayed themselves in a line in front of us, one per section.

"Are you ready?" one called out to the crowd.

We mumbled back. I don't think it was the answer she was looking for, but youth is persistent.

"I said, are you ready?"

A louder response this time. I had a feeling it was a whisper compared to what they probably heard from other groups. Music was cued up over the sound systems and we were instructed to grab our badges and flip them over: we were practicing the fight song.

I wish I could say we stood up and cheered, we embraced school spirit and the raucous energy of our team being the best team. I want to say the doors blew open and slammed against the wall with the force of our participation. At best, however, it was a decibel or two above where we answered before, so dismally unenthusiastic they asked us to do the song again. I don't know that I would say the second was dramatically better than the first, but our spirit leaders either gave up or called it good enough.

To be honest, under the embarrassment squirming through my skin and the ingrained habit of doing whatever it takes to fit in, I felt bad for our temporary cheerleaders. They obviously love the school, and genuinely want to share that love and include us all in the excitement of being a new student. Those are wonderful things and I appreciated them on that level. It wasn't them, it was us. Well, it was some of us.

New Student Orientation is designed to give students an introduction to their new school. It is a parade of peppy music, social opportunities, academic and wellness support, campus tours, a resource fair with swag, free food, and a chance to meet others in your major while you wait to schedule classes with your advisor. It is exactly what it ought to be, a fun and thorough welcome to your new community, excitement and nerves competing for space in the plasticity of the undergraduate brain.

Transfer Student Orientation is designed along the same principles, but at a quicker pace and some hints of a dry irony in the voices of the speakers; we know you've done this before, they seem to say, but we have a lot to offer. They do, and proceed to show us as if we were brand new. It's the system. It's their job. And for the 18-22 year olds in the crowd moving from a two-year institution or another university, it's spot on, just the right mix of youth and cynicism. The fight song is still a rallying cry.

It isn't their fault, any more than it's ours, that the system isn't built for us. Tertiary institutions as a whole fail to consider in a meaningful and encouraging way that not everyone has the luxury of access to higher education straight from high school. The model is built with an ideal student in mind:

White, moderately affluent, cisgender, able-bodied, neurotypical, and heterosexual young men. Kimberlé Crenshaw's excellent model of intersectionality can be put to use here: each step from that ideal strips away the privilege of being in a community that sees, recognizes, and is built for you.

Those of us in the crowd that day at Transfer Student Orientation heard something different than our younger peers, because the institutions don't speak our language.

It's hard to be inspired by the fight song when you're not invited to the game.

"The potential of new stories becomes transformative in the reconciliation of memory, history, and trauma," writes Romeo Garcia in *On the Cusp of Invisibility: Opportunities and Possibilities of Literacy Narratives.* "The stories we tell others of ourselves are those that indicate constellative epistemologies. The stories we tell of where we are from and going are those that indicate the emergent component of our being, seeing, and doing." This accumulated knowledge is rich in the artifacts of generational poverty, a trauma itself but often indicative of multiple and sustained opportunities for trauma. The stories my mother told me of her childhood, my father's retelling of his youth, the overlap of their lives and perspectives unquestionably informed my own story, as it exists now and in the incipiency of my post-secondary educational journey. That reconciliation Garcia refers to is essential to changing the trajectories and outcomes of disadvantaged populations. My parents recognized their own experiences with literacy and how critical strong literacy skills are to academic success, which they knew translated to financial success and thus, hopefully, a better life. They weren't wrong – functional or better literacy skills are tied to higher outcomes across the board, from financial and career success to physical and

mental health (Mulcahy 7-9). But that recognition and desire to improve the lives of their children didn't necessarily translate directly to improving their own lives. After all, my mother started reading, as I assume many do, out of sheer spite.

Let me explain.

My father would arrive home in the evening from his job at a pharmaceutical packaging plant, one of four million factories in my hometown of Evansville, Indiana. He would come in through the back door of our brown shotgun-style A-frame house – a rental, right across from my elementary school – into the kitchen, and give my Mom a kiss. After a shower, he'd come back downstairs, and we'd all eat dinner at the oak table with the glass inlay, me, my brother, my Mom, my Dad. Dad would ask about school, Mom would ask him about work, my brother and I would shovel our pork chops and canned peas into our mouths at opportune moments to try to make the other answer first so we had time to craft the perfect answer. Dave and I would clear the table and wash the dishes, which always took longer than it needed to because siblings communicate through wiping dirty dishwater on each other and turning the towel into a terrycloth weapon of terror. We'd go up to our rooms and get ready for bed, then come down to the living room. The four of us would read our separate books, my dad in his big biscuity vinyl recliner, mom on the pastel floral sofa with its curved wooden edges and feet – "It's a Queen Anne!" – that we were given by my great-aunt, and my brother and I sprawled on the worn brown carpet, belly down, bony knees and elbows warring for space even though there was plenty for both of us. Dad would be reading Stephen King, or Dean Koontz. Dave would have a Choose-Your-Own-Adventure paperback, heavily creased and dog-eared. At this age, I would be on my fourth re-read of Little House on the Prairie, also heavily creased and dog-eared. Neither of us could keep track of a bookmark to save our lives. And Mom, she'd have a Danielle Steele novel in hand. It was a photo, in many ways, of an average, lower-working-class family, almost idyllic. You'd never guess that it all came about from an act of passive-aggression from a frustrated wife.

Mom didn't read because she had little exposure to books, and little practice reading outside of school, two influential indicators for adult literacy (Desjardins 215, 221). She was the youngest of three and born, I suspect, because family planning has a different meaning in economically depressed rural America. Her own father couldn't read or write, only sign his name, and her mother had a son and daughter already and saw no need to involve herself with another. It is a tragic story of neglect and abuse, and a testament to my mother's resolve and resilience that she not only escaped the cycle, but did the work to break it for us as well. She passed away from breast cancer in 2005, at 44, so I have only my memories and my dad's to use here, but what details I might miss in precision is true in spirit.

We have a better understanding now of public schools as a community center, attempting to eliminate the iniquity of poverty, hunger, and instability on a neighborhood level, encouraging educational success in children by addressing the needs of the parents as well (Diamond and Freudenberg). Despite all the conservative-leaning warriors who believe it's a parent's responsibility to feed, clothe, and shelter their child – and they aren't wrong, exactly, just shortsighted -as a society we recognize that if a parent fails to participate in that responsibility, the child is left to suffer if others don't step up. My mother was just such a child, who only had a regular supply of nutrition from school and what she could steal when her parents would disappear for days at a time without leaving any food in the house for her. What money her parents would earn would be spent on drinks at the VFW or the drinks and horses at the track. Apparently you don't need to be able to read to sign a betting slip. Her siblings, too, were older and rarely around, and when it came to her brother, it was for the best; his entitlement did not stop at the bodily autonomy of others. She ran away to live with her aunt, who gave her steadiness and care, but when she moved back, the school would not reinstate her credits, so she dropped out.

It was an adjustment for her, after marrying my Dad, learning how to live with a reader. After spending all day attending to the often mind-numbing tedium of housework and the limited company of

two children who spent most of their time in school, outdoors, or reading in their rooms, Mom wanted to connect with someone, share her thoughts and experiences with another adult, her frustrations with someone who intimately knew her position in life. Dad, meanwhile, after spending his day in more social but equally mind-numbing tedium of factory line work, wanted to decompress and lose himself in a story. So he would read, and she would attempt conversation with him while he did with unsurprisingly limited success, until she decided one day to show him what it was like by reading herself. She was, as we all inevitably seem to be, hoisted by her own petard. She too fell in love with reading, and our family evenings of quiet literary pleasure emerged. Spite may not be the desired motivator for creating a reader, but it was certainly effective in her case.

Dad's childhood, though better than hers, wasn't free of abuse either. The abject poverty of the eastern Kentucky Appalachian valley – the Murrells have lived in Breathitt County, and some still do, since it was still part of Virginia post-Revolutionary War - lines the roots of my family tree on all sides, and it's a force that carries all manner of societal ills as coping mechanisms (Gibbs). As of 2014, mental and substance abuse mortality rates in the county are more than double the rate of the state as a whole, and almost half the children live under the federal poverty line (IHME). My grandfather, the second of 9 children, loved alcohol, history and crossword puzzles, in that order. He might have been the first in our family history to graduate college, attending Oakland City University in southern Indiana after he and my grandmother settled there. He planned to be a history teacher, but was shortly expelled for showing up to every class drunk. Though all three things influenced my Dad, it was the crossword puzzles that started his literacy journey. He'd watch his father look up words in the dictionary he kept on the shelf behind him, checking to see if he had the right one to solve the clue, and began to do the same. Grandpa

Murrell made it a habit to learn a new word every day, and that's another habit my Dad picked up. He was also a reader, favoring murder-mysteries and classic American literature, and being exposed to people reading for pleasure is a tremendous tool in the literacy toolbox, so my Dad became a reader as well (Clark and Rumbold 6).

Reading, for so many of us, is the best escape route when the world is out of order. For all that my grandfather introduced my father to the joy of reading, he also introduced him to alcoholism, violence, and terror. When Grandpa Murrell would get drunk, he would pull the shotgun down off the wall and walk around the house with it, threatening to shoot everyone. When they all first moved in to the big white house in Oakland City, they used the fireplace to keep warm since they didn't have heating, and Grandpa would set a can of gas next to the fire and tell them he was going to burn the house down and everyone in it. Grandma would drive the kids to a safe place, and though she called the police, it made little difference. Small towns being what they are, the police knew my grandfather, and would just say, "Oh Hank, put the gun down." There were no consequences. It's a common story in rural policing, especially in the Bible Belt, because patriarchal values and Christian values - two categories that cannot ever be a Venn diagram because of the overlap – hold more sway than any governmental policy (B.K. Payne et al. 33). Dad says he and his brothers would try to run away all the time but always ended up back home. Where else to hide, when everyone has failed you, but in the pages of a book? And as a young, closeted gay man with no vocabulary to understand himself and no mentor, what else could you rely on for comfort than a story?

My dad planned on going to college, and did, for a little while. He was planning on becoming an English teacher on the secondary level, so he was taking classes at night. But he was also working 10-hour shifts at a factory an hour's drive away, and also trying to manage homework, all while having a wife, a toddler and an infant at home with no other support than him. This kind of "time poverty" disproportionately affects a student's ability to attain a degree (Wladis et al. 822). It wasn't a

manageable situation, and so he dropped out, and never returned. A few years later, my Mom got her GED, and a decade after that, at 36, she got cancer.

Any one of the things Mom had to handle would be justification enough to break, but she was so strong. When she discovered the lump in her breast, her first doctor told her it was a calcium deposit and not to worry about it. A year later, it was still there and a little bigger, so she went for a second opinion, and not only was it cancer but it had metastasized into her lymph nodes. She went through chemo, radiation, had a hysterectomy and a double-mastectomy and dealt with all the trauma those surgeries and treatments bring with them, getting miserably sick and losing her hair, and still dedicated herself to the Susan G. Komen Foundation chapter, volunteered to teach classes in beadwork at the Hope Cancer Resource Center, and participated in every Race for the Cure event in the tri-state area. She went into remission, and things were looking bright, so she enrolled in college to study radiology, to do mammograms with the traveling mobile breast cancer treatment center. I remember how excited she was to start. She never thought college was in the stars for her.

Unfortunately, she was right. A week before classes began, she received the call no cancer patient wants to hear. Her brief reprieve of remission was over. The cancer was back and growing, not only in her breast tissue now but on her liver as well. There was a clinical trial starting at Indiana University of a new cancer drug, and it was probably her best bet, but she would have to drive to Indianapolis, a lengthy trip of 4-5 hours, once a week. Faced with that knowledge, she dropped out of college before she'd ever had a chance to step foot in a classroom. It is a stained-glass window of tragedy, given what she was able to accomplish in her short life with limited education, that she was never able to access the education that could very well have saved, or at least extended, her life. The practices of deeper thinking and inference, of questioning, researching, and synthesizing information that we begin to learn in high school and realize in college would have made her suspicious of her first doctor's dismissal (Desjardins 206). It's difficult not to make correlations between ignorance and

compliance, and how systems of power benefit from both. The voting record of the states with the highest rates of illiteracy and poverty speak for themselves.

(maps via worldpopulationreview.com)

My own literacy practices were unquestionably formed by the influences of my family. Before my grandfather died, anytime he was out of the house or asleep I would snatch up the dictionary and prowl the pages looking for juicy new words. Reading came easily to me and I loved every minute of it, devouring sometimes multiple books a day, and while as an adult I recognize some of that hyperfocus is one of the superpowers of an ADHD diagnosis, it's also a pure and genuine appreciation for what language can do. And as I grew into adolescence, it became for me, as it was for my father, an escape.

I clawed my way into the world with lungs full of liquid, earning me a week-long stay in an incubator. The treatment for bacterial pneumonia in children is amoxicillin, which has an unfortunate side effect of interfering with enamel development on teeth. "Soft teeth" is the horrific, shudder-inducing phrase often used, two words that simply do not ever belong together. My baby teeth grew in with cavities. I chipped a tooth on a bowl of ice cream, in a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. At one point, in fourth grade, I had 12 fillings, four caps, and spacers on my top and bottom teeth. We all hoped my adult teeth would grow in more sturdy, but no such luck.

We were a single-income family, with no health insurance at the time because Indiana is an at-will state. My mother had been working as a leasing agent at our apartment complex but had to quit because of her chemotherapy treatments, and shortly after my dad, who was working as the maintenance manager there, was fired for taking time off to take my mother to chemotherapy treatments. It wouldn't have mattered anyway, because dentistry, like vision, is rarely considered medically necessary by health insurance companies, and more than half the country doesn't have dental insurance (Manski et al.). My parents, I'm sure, went even more in debt trying to pay for my dentists. I would do the same for my children, should it be necessary.

I had my first root canal my freshman year of high school, and horror of all horrors, the entire front of one of my front teeth chipped off while eating beef jerky on a trip to visit my best friend's brother in college. Puberty is a terrible time for all teenagers, but it was a particularly traumatizing experience for me. I became a 5'9" humanoid turtle, speaking little and never smiling with my mouth open. I spent my lunch in the library with a book, reading about people who had teeth that worked the way teeth are supposed to work, vicariously being a "normal" teenager. It's a long and complicated story for another time, but I ended up with dentures at 19.

The internet as a social space became viable around this time. My friend and I played around on AOL chatrooms, and I discovered IRC and website forums and chatrooms, places where how I looked was irrelevant, where what I had to say, who I felt myself to be, and who I represented myself to be through my words was what mattered. I became a whole person through text instead of that tall, skinny snaggletooth blonde with the gigantic chip on her shoulder. I was exposed to so many people with so many stories. For all the nightmare fuel that exists on the internet today, it was and still is a haven for the socially awkward, the shy, anyone who doesn't recognize themselves in the people around them (Di Gennaro and Dutton 613). The early internet was the Isle of Misfit Toys, where those of us with irregular edges could sit comfortably together, not pieced tightly into a cohesive unit but a collective and colorful

array of united difference. From these people I learned about Matthew Shepard, about the Kosovo bombings, of what it was like to be a middle-aged lesbian in Washington and a closeted gay teen in a religious family in Ohio. I had friends in London working at the BBC who struggled with Crohn's disease and a farmer in New Zealand caring for his wife, who was wheelchair-bound with MS. I was blessed to have a loving, open, and stable home family, and doubly blessed to have an equally loving, open, and stable found family. It was through the internet that I found two of the most important people in my life.

It was Phillip who encouraged me to pursue college when I told him I wanted to be a journalist. He told me it would be a great waste of time to major in journalism, that I should instead major in English and minor in history. He was a copy editor at the Washington Post, a chronic insomniac with a lovely wife and son who spent a great deal of time in his basement with cigars. He would send me books on any topic in which I expressed a lack of knowledge. We did a buddy read of Jacques Barzun's *From Dawn to Decadence: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life* – a book I never would have picked up on my own, and one I still have, absolutely littered with margin notes and post-its from years of use. He introduced me to Bill Walsh, another copy editor at the Post, whose style books are thoroughly entertaining, were hugely influential on my writing style, and who became another friend. Both have since passed away as well, both too young, both to cancer.

I had filled out a few college applications my senior year, but it was never something we really talked about at home. My school counselors offered no guidance, there weren't any assemblies or college fairs, no flyers or letters of persuasion. Maybe there were for AP students and students on the Honors track, but I was too busy being consumed by depression and self-pity to do more than underachieve to the best of my ability. I loved English class though, and the feedback I got from teachers was enough to put the pen to page on my application for NYU, going so far as to get a recommendation from my senior year teacher. I recognize now the absurdity of thinking I could get in on the strength of an essay, a recommendation, and a 1.9 GPA, but I think I must have some inkling even then because I

never submitted it, and I have since learned that it's a common story for first-generation students to avoid highly selective schools (Pascarella et al. 274-275). I moved to Texas with my internet boyfriend instead, who had been living with us for a year, to work as web developers at an internet start-up company. And moved back home three months later. At that point, it seemed like even though I had always dreamed of being a writer, of getting my degree, I had let it go. I started working as a leasing agent, just like my mom, at the same place, and settled in to a life I didn't want.

My brother followed his friends into the perilous waters of the quasi-trade, for-profit post-secondary world, attending ITT Technical Institute in pursuit of an electronics engineering degree. For all that we both enjoy reading and are technologically adept, my brother is distinctly left-brained, where I am highly allergic to numbers. The disadvantages to first-generation college students from backgrounds of poverty are clearly on display in his journey (Schade 323-330). At the time, our household income was under $30,000 for a family of four. We were in deep medical debt, with Mom making $5 monthly payments to stay ahead of default. Despite her chemo treatments, she was working part time from home for a local non-profit cancer resource center to help make ends meet. My brother and I were both working too, to minimize the burden. My brother never filed a FAFSA, instead taking out high-interest private loans through the school that he couldn't afford, loans he ultimately couldn't pay and so, despite earning his associate's degree, he does not have one. None of us knew about Pell grants, which we both certainly would have qualified for, not to mention need-based grants and scholarships. The egregiously predatory practices of this particular institution received its just reward in 2016, but there are plenty of others who prey on similar targets throughout the country.

The other most important person in my life that I met on the internet is the person I married. My husband and I met in the same chatroom where I met Phillip, and he was everything I wasn't: educated, well-read, punk rock. He introduced me to bands like The Exploited and would read me Sharon Olds poetry. His background, though I didn't know this until later in our relationship, was very nearly the

complete opposite of mine – his parents are both college graduates, he and his sister went to prestigious private schools with the children of senators, his father was a professor of pathology at Vanderbilt – except for that he chose to attend public school here in Utah, and ended up dropping out of the University of Utah 5 years into his studies in English and political science. Where my parents maybe thought about college for me, they didn't know anything about SAT/ACTs, acceptance rates or college tours, and it was a given that if I were going to go, it would need to be on a scholarship because we simply could not afford it. This lack of access to information is a typical hurdle for first-generation students (Engle 30). My husband's parents, on the other hand, expected him to go to college. They wanted him to go to Vanderbilt, but paid for his tuition in Utah anyway.

He had a traditional college experience. His father was in a fraternity, so he joined the same fraternity. He made friends, went to parties and football games and events on campus, and put in some effort towards grades, but he says he reached a point where he just could not write another paper, a sentiment I think is echoed by a lot of students. As a baccalaureate of arts student, he also ran into the foreign language roadblock, one I am struggling with myself right now. Even so, he is exactly the candidate in mind when universities design programming and systems, the ideal archetype of American college student: White, wealthy, able-bodied, heterosexual, cisgender, and fresh from high school, with an above-average educational background and two teachers as parents (Zwick 5). If he couldn't access the support he needed to succeed in school, how can those of us without those privileges make it? How much harder do we have to work just to get to the same breaking point, let alone beyond it?

I never gave up, per se, on my dreams of going to college, but they were certainly shelved long enough to collect all manner of dust and excuses. I moved to Utah to live with my now-husband, holding a series of unfulfilling temporary office jobs that would hire someone who didn't hold a degree. I lost the job I expected to turn into full-time work when I went home to stay with my dad when my mom entered hospice care, and shortly after completing my training as a customer service representative at Overstock

I discovered I was pregnant. I worked throughout my pregnancy, and intended to return after my maternity leave, but the cost of childcare was so prohibitive that my entire salary was only just enough to cover the expense. It made more sense to stay at home with my child, and even more so after we discovered at 9 months that he had a traumatic brain injury in utero that resulted in low muscle tone and widespread developmental delay. In the span of a year and a half I had moved from an employee to a mother, a caregiver and therapist, roles that leave precious little room for academic pursuit. Being a parent and a student is difficult enough, as my father experienced. My schedule was so full of therapy appointments those first four years that no college or university could have reasonably accommodated my available hours. We had two more children after my son was born, and college remained on the backburner.

Barriers to educational access, from an American societal perspective, are somewhat narrow in how they are considered. All the major hurdles are covered: cost, acceptance rates, how to access information to register, challenges with systemic hurdles like language and admissions policies. But the challenges specific to adult learners, non-traditional students and particularly non-traditional first-generation students, are worth entry into the conversation as well. Despite the persistent narrative – and campus advertising – that higher ed is for young adults, nearly half of college students in the US are 25 or older, and more than a quarter are parents (Zack et al. 3). The barriers to access for non-traditional or independent students are different. That’s not to say that there isn’t overlap; tuition is prohibitively expensive, intersectional systemic barriers are quite real, and information access is certainly still a big challenge no matter the age of the student. But time, support and flexibility become the key components of success for adult learners. Wladis et al. use the concept of “time poverty” to describe this barrier, using a comparative study in the hours of discretionary time for college work, and the quality of that time, available to students with and without children. Student parents have less time overall, and lower quality time at that, than traditional students to devote to studies, which makes it more difficult to

keep momentum going as they work towards a degree. The disadvantages of time poverty also disproportionately affect women and BIPOC populations, the first because they tend to take on the lion's share of caregiving, and the second because of oppression and the lingering effects of colonialism in American systems (810).

When my youngest entered kindergarten, I began working at his school as a reading interventionist. Schools are tremendous sources of support for the intellectually curious. Everyone in the building is happy to share what they know, and happy to help you learn. One of my coworkers was a behavior aide who worked with and loved my oldest child, and was in a similar place in life where her kids were older and her career had no upward mobility; the natural trajectory of a behavior assistant is towards school social work, but the only path is through a 4 year degree program. Likewise, though I was actively teaching small groups, Utah law requires licensure to teach classrooms. We would often talk about wanting to go to college and pursue degrees. When we were sent home for COVID-19 in March of 2020, and still had no plan for return by mid-summer, we both – like many around the country – decided to make the most of our unexpected free time and enrolled at Salt Lake Community College.

There is little, if any, personal guidance available for adult learners attending college for the first time after they complete enrollment on the SLCC website. You watch an orientation video and try to navigate the website to the best of your ability. I had a background in internet work, which put me at an advantage compared to my friend, who I had to walk through it. No advisors reached out to me – I had to contact one of them, and he was not particularly helpful, confirming only what I had already figured out on my own. My friend couldn't get an advisor to call her back. It is a very real flaw in the system of an otherwise high-quality school, this difficulty in getting the process started, and getting guidance on how to maintain it. In Toth et al's *Bridging Literacies: First-Generation Transfer Students in a Writing Studies Major*, first-generation students outline the challenges they experienced in both enrollment and transfer, citing much of what I've expressed here: the process, without support and guidance, is

demoralizing and discouraging. Community colleges like SLCC have above-average rates of non-traditional, first-generation learners, and while the vast majority are pursuing a bachelor's degree, only 16% go on to earn one at a four-year institution. Again, it isn't hard to make the connections between the barriers to access and the outcomes.

In Spring 2021, I took a single class, a remedial math course for no credit because I didn't think I could hack it in college algebra. This was my first college-level course and it was entirely online, with only videos for education, and it was one of the most stressful experiences of my life. I completely understand why people drop out after their first semester, especially adult learners who are 10+ years out of the classroom. But I made it through, and immediately chose two more classes to take that summer that would help fulfill my general education courses.

One of those two classes was a Western Civilization course that I was really looking forward to, because I enjoy European history, especially post-1300. It too was an entirely online class, and like the math course was video and audio lecture-based, with a great deal of reading, tests, discussions, and a primary project of a 12-page-minimum research paper using one of a set of preformed topics. This is where an advisor would have been very useful, because this is a course I should not have taken without having some college writing experience first. I hadn't written a paper at all in more than two decades, and none of those were anything like what was being asked of me in this class. I couldn't tell you what MLA format was at the time, let alone Chicago. I was in no way prepared for the level of difficulty I encountered in writing that paper.

A threshold concept discussed in Writing Studies is that writing does not spring forth from the ground unformed, it is a practice that is empirically created (Lunsford 54). Post-secondary institutions have a covert expectation that students will enter their freshman year with experience in academic writing, because the systems are designed such that undergraduate studies are an extension of the PK-

12 school structure; grades 13, 14, 15, and 16, respectively. First- and second-year composition classes, those vast and echoing halls of adjunct despair, attempt to both reinforce and create the expected competencies but it is a thankless and difficult task. The disparity in ability to perform those competencies among students, and the ability to bridge the gaps in learning among first-year students who aren't consecutive learners, hamper the ability of the classes to truly meet the needs of students, and first-generation non-traditional learners in particular. That writing is a practice informed by experience also means that negative writing experiences can impact how a student approaches writing. From a personal perspective, I have enjoyed the privilege of being a strong writer in terms of creativity and a good grasp of mechanics, but my neurodivergence makes organization a very real, anxiety-inducing challenge, especially in academic informational writing, such as 12-page research papers. Strategies for typical students are established and reinforced in high school, but students like me with ADHD had to create our own strategies, and they consistently fail to carry over into adulthood (Wolf 389).

Between my own perfectionist tendencies and my anxiety about doing things "wrong", Western Civ taught me that I needed to go back on my anxiety medications, that days of binging Dr. Pepper and ibuprofen on an empty stomach as you frantically try to piece together something coherent will cause an ulcer that will take 3 months to fully heal, and that despite those things, I can do hard things. When I went to my doctor to talk about the medication, she said, "If it's causing you this much trouble, why don't you drop out?" I didn't want to drop out. I wanted to succeed. I wanted to show myself, my husband, my children, my dad, the memory of my mother that the degree of difficulty doesn't have to determine the outcome. I didn't want to add to the dropout statistics for adult learners trying to claw their way out of generational poverty.

I'm in my last semester of my journey at SLCC now, the last four classes I need for my associate's degrees in English Studies and Writing Studies, respectively. An advisor probably would have warned me not to take so many in a condensed summer term, especially considering I am also taking two courses at

the University of Utah to get a head start on my bachelor's degrees, also in English and Writing Studies. I won't pretend I'm not making sacrifices to pursue my educational goals. There is a lot of guilt, especially as a parent, for doing anything that makes you less available to your children, and some really complicated feelings about the astronomical expense involved in the academy experience. Earlier this spring I was balancing four part-time jobs along with a full-time college schedule in an attempt to maintain our financial status quo without taking on school debt, because I have a 17-year-old son who will be attending college next year, and a 15-year-old who isn't far behind, which also adds some unspoken time-to-completion pressure. By March, the guilt and the burnout were so intense I considered dropping everything. To be a good student and avoid debt, I sacrificed the maintenance of all my relationships and hobbies, and that is not a sustainable space, nor should it be an expected one for anyone. My husband says I'm working harder than he ever did in college, and I can't help but think part of that is it never occurred to him that he wouldn't have the opportunity to pursue a degree, and it never stops occurring to me that I am privileged in just the opportunity to try.

When I say "those of us" in the crowd that day at Transfer Student Orientation, it's the students like me I'm referring to. Students in their later twenties, thirties, forties, or older, with decades of experience in the workforce and out in the social world. Students who had no guidance in navigating higher education because they're the first to be able to go, because they're fighting years of inequity, whether that's poverty, gender, race, age, disability, sexuality, or any intersectionality of any or all. Students who are parenting young children, or teenagers, or who have reached empty nests and find themselves with a surplus of time and energy. Students who had never stepped foot on a college campus before. Students with mortgages, who have spent hours on the phone arguing with insurance companies

and have perfected the telemarketer brush-off. Students who know there is exquisite joy to be found in attaching a “No Soliciting” sign on or near their front door. Students whose palms have left imprints on their foreheads in dark rooms, wondering how they are going to make ends meet. Students who have to study the campus parking maps very carefully to find the optimal spot for accessibility. Students who wonder if it’s going to be worth it, all this time and money and potential for resentment, or if it’s selfish to prioritize your own dreams when you are still nurturing the dreams of others. Students who are balancing all the moving parts of a family, scheduling classes around doctor’s appointments and school activities and full or part-time jobs, or acting as caretakers for the older adults in their lives. We aren’t spending precious Saturdays cheering on the home team at the stadium, we’re filling out life insurance paperwork or taking books back to the library or pretending that a 30-minute nap will make up for years of poor sleeping habits.

There are great services and opportunities advertised at student orientations, especially on campuses that have made a concerted effort to be community-focused and need-driven environments, with basic needs assistance, mental health services, low-cost healthcare, and immunizations. And steps are being taken in the right direction to provide support for students, especially young first-generation, multicultural and polylingual students, who are in some ways only just now learning about the game, let alone being issued an invitation. But until the foundational offerings of the university system start taking into account the much broader audience, catering to or, at the very least, recognizing and working with the diverse experiences of first-generation, non-traditional students and what they have to offer, the promise of the academy as a richly rewarding environment for knowledge, equity and social change will remain, to those of us outside of the demographic, as hollow as the fight song.

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