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A Personal Journey

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The purpose of this scholarly personal narrative is to address a practitioner's experiences in the academy and examine how she defines success. Her identity within her communities and personal factors which have contributed to her continued pursuit of success will also be discussed. This narrative illustrates ways in which student affairs professionals can identify and support students with complex identity backgrounds to achieve success.

"There are three names you are called during your lifetime: The one your parents call you; the one your friends call you; and the one you make for yourself."
-Taoist Saying, n.d.

In recent months, I have spent a great deal of time looking back. Tracing my path to this point, I reflect in order to better understand why things have worked out so well. By my definition, I am a success. A college graduate, Masters Degree recipient, and student affairs professional, I have achieved many of my personal and professional goals. I have a great family, loving friends, and on the whole, I am happy. But this success has not been achieved as a result of an easy road or an unfettered path. It has been hard earned and has involved a tiresome and often lonely journey. My road to success has been risky, daring, adventurous, and one that at many points along the way, I thought about abandoning. But I did not give up. When I reached the end of my rope, which happened time and time again, I just held on. How and why was I able to hold on so tightly? What was I expecting to achieve? Why did I persist when all of the statistics (Collins, 2000) and signs pointed to the likelihood of my attrition? What made it possible for my sister and me, out of 12 cousins, to be the only two to successfully complete our undergraduate and Masters degrees?

This is my story, my attempt to understand how I, as a first-generation, working-class woman have made meaning and defined success within the multiple communities to which I belong. I have a complex family history and identity narrative, one which has presented many barriers and roadblocks on my journey toward success. Perhaps I simply stumbled upon the right path, but chance should not determine success. I hope to illuminate that path through this narrative so student affairs professionals might better assist students facing identity-based obstacles.

These five questions frame the research and the narrative that follows:

1. What does it mean to be identified as an at-risk student?
2. How did my working-class and first-generation college student identities contribute to my at-risk status?
3. What have I encountered during my transition from a first-generation, working-class experience into a middle-class educational experience?
4. What identity development models exist that can assist student affairs professionals in understanding the needs of students going through this transition?
5. How have I come to understand success?

Within my own narrative, and within the context of this research, I will illustrate the importance of personal narrative in understanding the myriad challenges which can impact individuals attempting to chart their course for the first time through the academy.

Methodology

"Writing is easy; all you have to do is sit down and bleed."
-Barber, 1971

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"Do not think your truth can be found by anyone else."
-Andre Gide, n.d.

Meaning-making is the core of scholarly personal narrative writing: "To write a personal narrative is to look deeply within ourselves for meaning that just might, when done well, resonate with other lives; maybe even inspire them in some significant ways" (Nash, 2004, p. 22). Scholarly personal narrative guides this article and reflects how I have made meaning and success in my life, despite unexpected obstacles and plenty of opportunities to give up and go home.

To assist in shaping and understanding my scholarly personal narrative research, I used both personal interview questions and family observation. Specifically, I designed a series of questions to guide my personal reflection and inquiry and observed three significant family events during my research, including my immediate, extended, and stepfamily. During the family gatherings, I looked for messages that established a model for defining success. I listened to general conversation and stories to better understand beliefs and values within the families.

Additionally, as I was writing this article, I was a participant in an interview experience with the *New York Times* (Lewin, 2005) about the cross-class relationship between my father and stepmother. This family exploration revealed much to me concerning my own beliefs and attitudes about being in a cross-class family and taking on the values of the middle-class. Specifically, differences in how my stepbrothers, my sister, and I have developed our attitudes toward money and education were revealed.

With this research and my personal story, scholarly personal narrative provides the opportunity to answer the research questions and share with the academy how one at-risk student enrolled, persisted, and succeeded in the academy. The literature review that follows incorporates my scholarly personal narrative and reflection. In the process of making meaning, I see the literature review as an opportunity to parallel my narrative with the research of others.

Literature Review

At-Risk

"First-generation students who persevere beyond secondary school are regarded as being 'at-risk' for stopping out or dropping out of college."
-Collins, 2000

A student sat across from me during her senior career advising appointment and cried. The idea of even thinking about her post-college career was too much for her. Through her tears she related her story of first-generation, at-risk struggle. In her I saw a reflection of myself. Like this woman, there were many moments throughout college when I had good reasons to shed a few tears. I felt alone in my college experience; my parents were frequently unavailable, both emotionally and financially, and the whole college experience was foreign to me. I did not have many models of college success, and I did not feel comfortable with what success meant to me.

This feeling of discomfort has stayed with me, and as I read through the research I identified with what Hsiao (1992) and many other researchers have described as the tension many first-generation college students feel among their families and friends as a result of their entrance into college. Hsiao illustrated that students feel this tension:

…Particularly as they begin to take on the symbols of the college culture — be it style of dress, taste in music, or range of vocabulary—first- generation students often sense displeasure on the part of acquaintances, and feel an uncomfortable separation from the culture in which they grew up. (p. 1)

I also identified with Collins (2000), who described common experiences that develop in the lives of first-generation students as they search for cultural membership in higher education: trouble at home, feelings of isolation, disconnection with family, emotional turmoil, and perseverance despite it all.

Pointing to these factors, Collins (2000) noted the increased rate for stopping or dropping out for first-generation college students and labeled them with the term *at-risk*. I was an at-risk student. There were many factors at home and at school that contributed to my own feelings of chaos and uncertainty, anxiety, and heightened emotional experiences. There were times when I felt overwhelmed by a lack of control in my life. Feelings of helplessness were common. For me, being at-risk was about walking a thin line, one which could at any moment disappear and leave me with no path or structure to follow. The possibility of straying off course was ever-present.

In my attempt to understand what it means to be at-risk, I want to be mindful of all of the influences that impact risk and thus impact success. My identity as a first-generation college student has played a significant role in my at-risk identity characteristics. The next section acknowledges and explores how additional identity characteristics may factor into the attrition equation.

Terminology

"Our lives, at times, seem a study in contrasts, love and hate, birth and death, right and wrong, everything seen in the absolutes of black and white. Too often we are not aware that it is the shades of grey that add depth and meaning to the starkness of those extremes."
-Ansel Adams, n.d.

As this narrative has developed I have found myself narrowing my focus on the identity factors of being first-generation and belonging to dual economic and social classes. What follows are the terminologies as I could best find them described within the research.

Defining the first-generation identity.
The term *first-generation* is one that I became familiar with as a high school student who benefited from Upward Bound, a federally funded program which assists college-bound, first-generation, and low-income students in achieving their goals. Collins (2000) defined first-generation as "a broad label intended to serve as professional shorthand in describing a segment of the college student population for whom there are no familial models about preparing for, applying to, or attending a college or university" (p. 4). While first-generation college students typically have had neither parent attend college, I believe that the first-generation classification can apply to students who have had only one parent attend and persist through college or whose parents have graduated non-traditionally. The critical factor is the familial model and the attitudes about college communicated within the family.

First-generation college students are frequently defined as being from blue-collar, low-income backgrounds (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1995). These terms–*lower-working class, working-class, blue-collar,* and *low-income*–are all identifiers I found throughout the literature in tandem with information about many first-generation college students.

Defining class.
While class has frequently been associated with income brackets, there is so much more to it than numbers. Scott & Leonhardt (2005) define class as life-style; social mobility; and access to education, healthcare, and capital. "Class is rank, it is tribe, and it is culture and taste. It is attitudes and assumptions, a source of identity, a system of exclusion. To some, it is just money" (p. 8). Lubrano (2004) offers an alternate perspective:

From an early age, middle-class people learn how to get along, using diplomacy, nuance, and politics to grab what they need. It is as though they are following a set of rules laid out in a manual that blue-collar families never have the chance to read. (p. 9)

Lubrano defines upper-class privilege in terms of cultural capital. In an "educated, advantaged, environment" upper-class individuals learn about and are exposed to the fine arts–"Picasso and Mozart, stock portfolios and crème brûlée"–and belong to a community full of networking opportunities (2004, p. 9). Defining class means defining the cultural beliefs and capital of the class group. Regardless of definition, class is a touchy subject (Fussell, 2004).

Identity Factors

> "The functional relationship between education, particularly higher education, and social structure remains linked in a complex matrix of gender, race, and class."
> -Collins, 2000

My class background and familial roots have shaped my identity. Literature reveals that identity development impacts the way students experience college (Evans, Forney, & DiBrito, 1998). As such, it is no surprise that my persistence, perseverance, and success in college was heavily influenced and significantly shaped by these identities. At times I tried to mask or hide from my identities; I was embarrassed by my working-class and familial background and did my best to pretend I was a "typical" college student. Despite my best efforts, my first-generation, working-class identity followed and haunted me, even as I began to emerge as a member of the educated middle-class. I, like many first-generation college students from working-class backgrounds, struggled to fit within the academy's middle-class norm (Walling, 1998).

My need to mask or hide from my working-class and first-generation identities was simply a tool for survival. Entering college, I was academically prepared. I knew how to study, I felt confident in my social skills, and, as an Upward Bound participant, I knew a key to success was to get involved. However, I was not prepared for the culture shock of entering an environment where students had extensive parental support, financial safeguards, spending money, and other luxuries. While I was fully aware of my identity as a first-generation, working-class student, I was not aware of how this identity would impact my college experience.

I became very good at "dressing the part" and learning the language and customs of the middle-class. I felt safe enough to acknowledge my family background and financial status to a few mentors and close friends, but on a Friday night when I was socializing with my peers, I generally put on the mask. No one knew that my mother and father had lost nearly everything, accrued thousands of dollars in debt, and were struggling with personal issues of their own. Putting on the mask was like living the life of two people. At school, I was middle-class; I had the same residence as everyone else, and we all ate the same food. At home, I was working-class and aware that my home was impermanent.

Dualing Identities

> "I am two people."
> -Lubrano, 2004

For me it has been important to understand my own dual citizenship, knowing the attitudes and beliefs of my working-class identity and coming to understand the values and expectations of my working-class family, while paying close attention to my reactions and challenges as I navigate my more recently acquired middle-class, college-educated, professional lifestyle.

I struggle most with the value and weight placed on me by both my immediate and extended working-class family about marriage, returning home, having children, finding a steady job with benefits, and settling down (Lewin, 2005). It is difficult for my family to identify with my choice to spend money on post-secondary education, worse even to accrue debt as a result of this choice. For many family members, job choices are limited. Throughout my childhood, there was a sense of hopelessness and despair among those members of my family who were out of work and relatively unemployable because they did not have a college degree. Without high school education, let alone a college degree, many close family members have been dependent on service jobs and at the mercy of the economy. In my immediate family unit, I was aware of poverty, unemployment, food stamps, and welfare. I was aware that my family qualified for these things. I am working-class.

I am also a member of the middle-class. As I persist further away from the values established within my familial model–having children, getting married, finding a good job with a pension–I receive messages that contribute to feelings of guilt and insecurity about not following this traditional family path. These conflicts, similar to the challenges confronting working-class and first-generation college students, cause me to feel pressure to conform to the success narratives of my family. I have a personal desire to persist within the academy and achieve my success narrative. This awareness has helped me to understand what I call my "dual citizenship" in the academic middle-class and in the non-academic working-class. Lubrano (2004), who examined the experience of straddling the working- and middle-classes, suggested that individuals who straddle two disparate class identities would ideally become "bicultural." In this biculturalism, the individual would come to understand who they are and "then learn to navigate the new setting" (p. 194).

Lubrano (2004) refers to individuals who cross two disparate class identities as "straddlers," a term I have also found throughout the literature. In fact, Lubrano wrote an entire book about how straddlers "live with an uneasiness about their dual identity that can be hard to reconcile," no matter how far from home or family they get (p. 8). Barreca (1999) also understood this feeling of straddling the class line and in the essay, *Money and Luck*, discussed feeling like she had borrowed her educational experience, "like somebody's earrings or their car, to be returned undamaged and unsoiled at a later date" (p. 31).

In my family, my mother describes her class background as lower middle-class. When I was a teenager, she earned less than $24,000 per year from her three jobs. I was acutely aware of this because we were eligible for benefits like the free lunch program at my school and food boxes from the local community food shelf. Though the government classified my family as poverty level, my mom still considered herself lower middle-class.

This is in sharp contrast to the experiences of my newly acquired stepfamily. My stepmother describes her class background as upper middle-class, but has a trust fund and comes from a family of inherited wealth. Yet, she still identifies herself as part of the middle. She attaches "upper" to her middle-class status, but is careful to stay within the middle when sharing her class background.

The middle-class represents the average. While having more than the average is appealing, fitting into the average is what drives many to describe themselves as "middle" in the current American class structure (Fussell, 2004). This idea was repeated throughout the literature and has been a prominent theme within my own narrative: just fit in.

How do I just fit in? While I struggled for a long time to fit in to what I perceived to be the "norm," "middle," or "average," I found these attempts to be futile. Fitting into the norm or average has not been that much different for me. I have had to pay attention to three key variables which I have coined: 1) *identity awareness*: know who I am and where I come from; 2) *identity impact:* come to understand my identities for what they are and how they impact me; and 3) *identity negotiation*: discover how to navigate through newly acquired middle-class and educated identities.

Thus, it is clear that identity factors and characteristics are important considerations for understanding how to support and illuminate the path toward success for first-generation, working-class students interacting with the middle-class academy. As I read through the literature and reflected on my narrative, I found myself seeking an identity development model that might support my findings.

Identity Development

"Talent develops itself in solitude; character in the stream of life."
-Goethe, n.d.

Despite my best efforts to find it, research revealed limited information that identifed a first-generation college student and/or working-class identity development model. I was delighted when a friend sent me a link which illustrated Cross's Black Identity Development (1971), Helms's White Racial Identity Development (1990), Downing and Roush's Feminist Identity Development (1985), and Roffman and Cathcart's Class Identity

Development stages (1996) in an identity development matrix (Identity Development Grid, 2005). While I found the matrix helpful and the information about class identity development to be valuable, it focused primarily on middle-class identity development, leaving a gap in the research. Research related to Roffman and Cathcart's work could not be found.

Other research illustrated student traits, such as difficulty facing transitions and challenges navigating the foreign culture of the academy (Howard & Levine, 2004). For students possessing differing cultural capital than the middle-class norm, the academy becomes a foreign land with differences in language, values, and beliefs. The college experience becomes daunting enough to make the most intelligent working-class student feel like an imposter (Lubrano, 2004, p. 85).

Howard and Levine (2004) discussed the importance and value in understanding the needs of poor/working-class students. These students bring significant diversity and valuable experiences to campuses. Learning about their needs and values will assist campuses in better understanding "student characteristics, student needs, the ways the campus can better serve them, and the ways in which the campus serves them well already" (p. 23).

To summarize, the literature suggested the following variables associated with first-generation, working-class success in the academy: 1) learning to become bi-cultural, which Walling (1998) defined as: "understanding the language associated with the middle and upper class" (p. 2), 2) negotiating finances and access to college (Howard & Levine, 2004), 3) having the resources to get in and stay in college (Howard & Levine, 2004), and 4) having internal and/or external support systems (Rodriguez, 2003).

I believe that I would not have persisted through college without these variables. In my experience, the success model for these variables relied on so many people. I benefited from the support of Upward Bound and student affairs administrators at my undergraduate institution. In addition, as I continue to develop my own professional philosophy, I keep these variables in mind, specifically remembering the time individuals like my student affairs mentors invested in me.

As I conclude, I am reminded again of my five research questions: 1) what does it mean to be identified as an at-risk student, 2) how do my working-class and first-generation college student identities contribute to my at-risk status, 3) what experiences have I had as I have transitioned from a first-generation, working-class experience into a middle-class educational experience, 4) what identity development models exist that can assist student affairs professionals in understanding the needs of students going through this transition, and 5) how have I come to understand success? Thus far I have found answers through reflection, observation, and research that have greatly assisted in resolving the first four queries. In the next and final segment, I will address how I have come to understand success.

Reflections on Success: The Right Ingredients

"Success is not the result of spontaneous combustion. You must set yourself on fire."
-Leach, n.d.

What does it mean to be a success? In the academy, success, persistence, and retention are the ultimate achievements for students. The *US News and World Report* has driven colleges to compete and illustrate the success of their students so as to achieve a high ranking in the annual calculations (Howard & Levine, 2004). Success defined in its traditional fashion simply means achieving what one sets out to do or achieving a desired outcome (Merriam-Webster, 2004). For colleges, success in an enrollment management plan may be the number of students who successfully complete their tenure at the college or university, or the retention and persistence of students as they demonstrate academic achievements and personal growth. Enrollment management is "a comprehensive process designed to achieve and maintain the optimum recruitment, retention and graduation rates of students" (Dolence, 1998, p. 71).

But for me, as demonstrated in this narrative, success is defined much differently. For me, success is surviving the complex challenges within my family, understanding my identity within the academy, and ultimately finding a place where I feel welcome, familiar, and a sense of belonging. As I mentioned at the beginning of this

narrative, this is not easy and can sometimes require a great deal of discomfort. I have had to straddle two worlds. I struggled to find my place within my family and fit within the academy.

During the process of building my path and learning to navigate these two disparate worlds, I have developed a competency in my own *identity awareness, identity impact,* and *identity negotiation.* This awareness set a foundation that has allowed for me to: 1) learn to become bi-cultural within the working- and middle-classes, 2) negotiate finances and access to college, 3) find the resources to get in and stay in college, and 4) create internal and external support systems to help me to get into, stay in, and succeed in college. There were times when I found myself lost or misdirected, as if I had embarked on a journey all by myself or the path beneath me had indeed disappeared. I know that my success was a result of the multi-layered safety net I had beneath me from familial, academic, and social communities.

Student affairs professionals can utilize this narrative to better serve students by looking at these key ingredients: 1) know who is at-risk and why, 2) help students to understand their identity within the academy and at home, especially when these two communities have values that conflict, 3) place value on the narrative of every student, and 4) ask students how and why they define success for themselves. Success in the academy is personal and defined by individual needs and experiences. It is only when such needs are acknowledged and identified that professionals can truly serve the students with whom they work. Within the student affairs field, educators must remember that our role in helping others succeed will depend on our own ability to guide students toward understanding their individual needs and experiences.

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