

Educational Autobiography

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Abstract

My educational biography deals with the topic of income, class, and privilege. As I grew up struggling with these issues, they created an inner-discord between my perception of privilege and the reality of privilege. However this was not a negative thing, instead it presented a valuable learning opportunity which came was eventually realized, leading me to where I am today. In this paper I explore how this evolution registered at each phase of my postsecondary journey, and how it eventually culminated into the personal, social, and political ideals that now drive me towards a career in social justice.

Educational Autography

When I reflect on my postsecondary education, I see the duality of privilege and struggle. As a white male I was certainly afforded many opportunities that others do not have, but I would argue against anyone who attempted to define my experience as easy. Ultimately, it was my financial status that would define my postsecondary studies from start to finish. I did not come from a financially healthy household, but I also never went hungry. We struggled more than most of my peers, but not as much as others. Needless to say my parents had no college funds for me, and this would be the defining aspect of my life in postsecondary education, continuing on today as a graduate student. Whether it was student loans, or working multiple jobs as a student, finances have dictated much of my personal development, leading me to where I am today personally, politically, and professionally.

In the summer after I graduated high school I began my postsecondary career at the local community college. My goal was to obtain some of the basic courses, as well as stall for a bit while I decided what major I wanted to pursue. This early experience at community college was beneficial in many ways, some of which I would not fully realize until later. At the time what ended up being most impacting was the exposure to adult- and non-traditional students. I was able to see firsthand the importance of not only continuing education, but also how education can uplift and transform individuals and the community they reside in.

At the time I did not fully realize the impact community college would have on me. While studying at community college I was mostly eager to get out to a “real” university, however, when I look back on this period I can say it was quite humbling and put me in a place in which I was confident and capable of handling the rest of my undergraduate career. As I now continue on with my education in higher education leadership I think back on this experience in

community college and it is one of my biggest motivations. Seeing the role the community college held was something I have come to appreciate very much, and as such I now have a strong desire to work in community college, as I have seen firsthand the benefit it can offer individuals and communities.

After my two semesters at community college I ended up at Eastern Kentucky University (EKU). At EKU, I was able to meet a wide variety of people, many from the impoverished communities of Eastern Kentucky and Appalachia. These new peers came from communities that were not unlike the coal-mining town I had grown up in. I never felt out of place here, aside from perhaps when I had to brush shoulders with the Greek letter organizations or the rugby team. In hindsight, perhaps this was not necessarily a good thing. I was surrounded by people that I felt comfortable with, but I would say that this hindered my multicultural awareness – I had simply gone from one monocultural community to another.

That is not to say I did not experience any growth or transformation at EKU. It was the peers, professors, and community that opened my eyes to Appalachian life, both the beauty of the region and people and the unique struggles faced. Of particular interest was the music and art of the region. As a music student I was hungry to devour all the music I could, and bluegrass did not disappoint. Much like the jazz music I was studying in the classroom, I found bluegrass appealing as it gave a medium in which the people of the region could share the beauty and struggle of life. Bluegrass so often dealt with themes of abandonment, death, and struggle, but it always seemed to have optimism within. Once again I would not fully realize the benefits of this experience until later when I became interested in the fight for social justice and equity of marginalized communities such as those in Appalachia.

It was after transferring to Bellarmine that I began to understand the full extent of my economic disadvantages. I was exposed to many peers who were capable of paying for their studies out-of-pocket, and many peers who did not have to work while studying. Neither of these applied to me. When I transferred to Bellarmine it was out of optimism for my future, optimism brought on by the opportunity to study at a school that seemed much more aligned with my own personality and goals. However this came with a price tag that was far more than that of ECU. As I grew older, moved off campus, and began having to take more and more student loans for tuition, I began to understand the financial battle that my family had dealt with for most of my life. Along with the mounting student debt, I also had to take two jobs in order to make my own ends meet.

I would be lying if I denied being jealous of my peers who did not face the same struggles. This was a very tumultuous time in my life in which the financial stresses I was under took a serious toll on me. Dropping out was not only something that crossed my mind, it was something I began actively considering multiple times. The weight of financial stress had become overpowering, and this was also beginning to contextualize so much of not only my upbringing, but also “life as an adult.” The daily stresses my mother dealt with and tried to conceal from my siblings and myself, the sacrifices that must often be made, and, above all else, the exploitative nature of capitalism.

This was also the time period in which I became conscious of the concept of privilege. Initially I was taken aback, “White privilege? How can anyone see my struggle and claim I have privilege?” I looked around at my peers who clearly were privileged and I struggled for some time to rectify this. Obviously this was an immature opinion lacking any nuance, and I am glad that I outgrew it. Nonetheless it also led me down the road of discovering what privilege actually

was. While perhaps I was not economically privileged, I was privileged in many other ways. If I could pinpoint a specific moment of clarity that led me to where I now am, I would have to choose this moment.

As I opened this paper with, I now seek to fight for not just myself, but others. While the struggles I dealt with coming from a low-income background were often overwhelming, I realize that many have far more severe disadvantages in life. In my fight for a better, more just world, I hope to stamp out the root of disadvantages and roadblocks of all kind. For it is my belief that prejudices and inequality are born from a larger societal problem that we must address directly.