

COMMENTARY

A First-Generation Student's Survival Strategy: Work More, Sleep Less

By David Hernández | JULY 02, 2017

The summer before I went off to college, I worked three jobs — about 75 hours a week — as a delivery driver for two pizza parlors and as a painter in the local hospital where my dad was a maintenance man. I was saving to pay the deposit for the private residence hall that I was moving into in the fall. I was the first in my family to attend college, and I was making my way without their financial support.

In some ways my family, which was working poor, Mexican-American, and split by divorce, viewed college suspiciously. They saw it as a financial drain taking the place of regular employment, and as a scene that was both morally and politically questionable. I didn't care. I just wanted to get out of town, even if only temporarily — that is, in case I dropped out, which many had predicted.

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My financial-aid package would not begin until the fall term started, but I had to pay the dorm deposit before then. I was not chosen in the lottery for on-campus housing, which would have been less expensive. I would learn later that as a scholarship kid, a minority on financial aid, I actually had my choice of dorms. But like a lot of things, I didn't know how it all worked, and there wasn't anyone around to tell me. The information vacuum would last all four years.

A friend drove me the 100 miles to pay the bill in person. Since neither my mom nor I had checking accounts or credit cards, I had only cash. At home we still used money orders from the supermarket to pay bills. So that summer I walked into an empty dorm tower, and when the person at the desk said it would cost \$1,300, I proudly handed her a huge roll of 20s, 10s, 5s and 1s. I don't think she knew what to do with it. I asked for a receipt.

Summers would come to represent annual gaps when I needed money in advance — for housing, for deposits, for moving. I had to earn this on my own. Like my pre-college summer, I regularly cobbled together multiple summer jobs on top of working 20 to 25 hours a week during the school year. Working more and sleeping less was my strategy for everything. Even when this strategy resulted in a case of mononucleosis, I stayed at college with nowhere to go, as my cash flow was dependent on being a student. It was my job.

As a student who identified as Mexican-American (soon to be Chicano), at a university that was then 85 percent white, I confronted isolation, racism, self-doubt, and feeling out of place. Initially I wanted to quit. It wasn't that people stared or showed hostility toward me. They mostly looked right through me, stood in my way, bumped into me. I was furniture.

I maneuvered the best I could around those roadblocks. Finances were always hard. But to be honest, with scholarships and financial aid, I was never richer. In class, I learned how racism and other discriminations worked for some and against others. I confronted this by replaying my story with a race consciousness. A decade of welfare, family alcoholism, being Chicano, never having vacationed or

gone to camp, Christmases without trees or presents — these would all begin to make sense.

What could today's universities and colleges do differently for a student like me? More money would always help — especially with today's rising costs and astronomical debt — but more information would help, too. First-generation college students, students of color, foster kids, single parents, veterans, and other "others" shouldn't be out of the loop of the opportunities and resources that are available. Institutions should do a better job of reaching out to them.

Bridge and transition programs make a difference at all stages of education. Especially in college, these programs can create early friendships, a sense of cohort, and answer the unaskable — What's a syllabus? Can I say "I" in my papers? What is a mentor?

Being "normal" and feeling welcomed are often out of reach. On move-in day that first fall term, I recall walking into my predominantly white dorm and feeling that everyone else already knew each other. When did this happen? Was I not invited to something? It was Day 1, and I was already the weird one. This gradually wears students down.

For so many young people, attending college is a rite of passage that places them on a similar plane with parents or other family members. It draws them closer. When you are the first in your family to attend college, it's the opposite. It tears you away from your family and community. You become permanently dissimilar — different at college, but also at home, simultaneously. Colleges should recognize that some students are making it in their own way, without a support system.

Looking back, I wish there had been a way for me to know more about how college worked — like that my strategy of working more and sleeping less would cut deeply into my education. I wish I had figured out a way at 18 to really experience the university, the intellectual part, the part I stress to my students today. I wish I could go back — if only to read more or more critically, to go to talks and hear speakers. I wish I had studied abroad and completed a thesis.

All told, I still graduated with high honors in a field in which I had no affinities or friends, and I'm pretty sure the other majors never noticed me anyway. I just wanted to get better grades than they did, and I often did. To beat the person who stood in my path, who never noticed me and regularly crowded my space, was satisfying and fed my confidence. It also lowered the bar. Beating them was fine, but I should have been setting my own goals and looking toward the horizon. I wish I had known that then.

Today, after a circuitous pathway, I am a tenure-track faculty member at a liberal-arts college. I was out of academe for five years before I went to graduate school — again delivering pizzas, working at hotels, and eventually working in the nonprofit sector. I wasn't on a break at the time. I had finished. I even walked out of my final final exam in econometrics because ... well, I was done with school, and the resulting low grade wouldn't change a thing.

Eventually, I would return to campus in search of what I had missed the first time around. I had moved beyond just trying to beat out competitors, and instead concentrated on learning for learning's sake. I was more in the know this time, but I would soon face graduate- and professional-level versions of my earlier challenges — How do you write a syllabus? What does a conference paper look like? Why is everyone speaking in a language that I don't know? As I figured these things out, I confirmed that I loved being on college campuses — studying, working, and teaching. As in my early college days, I had made it in my own way.

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