



ESSAY

Academic Challenge

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I am going back to college for the third time -- and I'm nearly as excited and as apprehensive as I was the first time.

I wasn't meant to go to college at all. My mother finished high school; my father didn't. They met at a trucking company where he was a driver and she was a secretary. I was one of three children, two girls and a boy. My parents decided they would try to send their son to college. As it turned out, they couldn't afford to send any of us.

Like my mother, I was a good student and a lover of books. But college wasn't part of my expectations. Then my father was transferred to Ohio, and I enrolled in a high school in Akron where 95 percent of the students went on to college. A "cake-eater school," some called it.

"Have you chosen a college major yet?" my guidance counselor asked briskly at our first interview. "With your test scores, you might get some scholarship money."

My friends asked, "Where are you going to college? In-state or out of state?"

So I applied to two schools. I never even took a tour. Although Ohio State University offered me a full-tuition scholarship, I was leery of leaving the job I'd had through high school and worried about paying room and board. My parents always taught me not to borrow money unnecessarily. The University of Akron offered a small scholarship, so I lived at home and commuted to the U of A, walking down the Exchange Street hill to my clerical job at the Akron Beacon Journal. I typed ad copy at work and papers at home.

I was that most challenging of students, one who is paying her own way. I asked my professors questions until I understood, was annoyed if an instructor was late, and weighed each session to see if I'd received my money's worth. I once wrote a scathing letter to a professor whose class I thought was not worth the tuition.

At the same time, college was a series of daily skirmishes in foreign territory. As a commuter student working full time, I never immersed myself in campus life. U of A suited me well at the time: A gritty urban university, a spare collection of buildings with teachers and libraries in them, as grimly efficient as I was. Still a year away from graduation, I married another student and moved into a rundown apartment across Exchange Street from the campus. We ate meatless meals and made bookshelves out of bricks and boards, and tables from cable spools. And I persisted, and finished. It took me five years.

As far as I know, I was the second person in my entire extended family to graduate from college. The first was my older brother, who also paid his own way.

Graduate school was much the same. I lived in Medina, worked full time in Geauga County and attended Case Western Reserve University at night. Learning was something that I

had to fit in. I don't mean like housecleaning or personal hygiene. I mean like needlework and writing and sex. For one golden semester (my last), I quit my day job and became a teaching assistant. I spent all day, every day, on campus, lingering for hours in the library, teaching and doing research. Immersion. I loved it. And then I went back to work.

Last year, I traveled with my son as he looked at colleges. Northwestern. University of Illinois. Ohio State. Stanford. Carnegie Mellon. I met faculty, sat in on classes and walked through libraries full of books and computers. I caught the excitement of young people on the cusp of adulthood, marveled at the piercings, the preps, the Goths. And loved it.

"This is a gift," I said to my son. "A privilege. My life is completely changed because I went to college."

He blinked at me, confused by my fervor. "I want to go back to school," I said. "Only this time, I want to stay."

"OK, Mom," he said, grinning.

And so I am returning to the University of Akron, my alma mater, in a new role. This time I've come to teach.

The university has changed since I was there, as I have changed. Sometimes I turn a corner and am completely disoriented. They are building dormitories. They have torn up streets and added green space. They are planting 30,000 trees, I hear. It is becoming a true campus, a haven, a Landscape for Learning, they call it. As a professor, I have an office with a window, and I can look across Exchange Street to my old neighborhood.

The university is still home to thousands of commuter students, many of them the first in their families to go to college. They are working, paying their own way. They know the value of an education.

They will ask questions. They will challenge me. At least, I hope they will.

And I will be ready.

Cinda Williams Chima loves being back at college but is glad she doesn't have to live in the dorm. She may be reached through magmail @plaind.com.

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