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College Graduation: It's A Big Deal

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Abstract

College graduation is a big deal for everyone. It's especially important to me as a graduate of the Philadelphia public schools, as a child of a low-income family, and as a first-generation Cambodian immigrant.

Keywords

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, college, graduation, Cambodia, immigrant

Disciplines

Asian Studies | Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education | Education | Educational Sociology | Race and Ethnicity | Social Statistics | Sociology

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Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](#) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at surgegettysburg.wordpress.com Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that -isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

COLLEGE GRADUATION: IT'S A BIG DEAL

May 14, 2014

College graduation is a big deal for everyone. It's especially important to me as a graduate of the Philadelphia public schools, as a child of a low-income family, and as a first-generation Cambodian immigrant.



Going to college was not in the forefront of my mind. It was not a conversation I had with my relatives or friends, nor was it promoted at the high school I attended. Where I grew up, college just was not a prevalent topic.

Fortunately, I had a few role models in my life that motivated me to pursue what I thought was an unattainable goal. I was introduced to extracurricular opportunities that allowed me to prepare for college; however, I know there are many others with backgrounds resembling mine who don't have such fortunate outcomes.

Just look at the facts:

According to the 2000 Census report, 53.3% of Cambodians in America aged 25 and up have a high school diploma. Less than 7% have a college degree. [1]

The Children of Immigrant Longitudinal Study reveals that first and second-generation Cambodian children are underperforming educationally compared to most other immigrant groups. [2]

Only 35% of college-goers from the School District of Philadelphia earn a college degree six years after graduating high school. [3]

Students from first-generation and low-income backgrounds are less likely to enroll in postsecondary education and less likely to persist through graduation. [4]

These may seem like plain statistics, but for me, this is reality. I felt stacked up against these facts since the beginning of my college career. Within my Cambodian community, only a few adults I knew, especially males, had aspirations to attend college; even fewer actually attained a degree. Only the students in the two Advanced Placement classes in my high school were thinking about college. I walked through my neighborhood the clothes

people wore and the cars they drove did not signify to me that any of my neighbors had gone to college. The thought of paying for school stressed and worried me. I had no idea what it even took to get into college or what it would provide for me.

In addition to my struggles, there are other struggles going on around me: My mother works 12-16 hour shifts in a factory and is unable to take English language classes because of her schedule. My father retired when I was in sixth grade and was robbed in front of our home. My big sister worked full-time while pursuing her bachelor's degree. The third-grade students I tutored struggled with reading and do not have English-speaking parents. The brother of the African American fifth-grade girl in my church was shot, leaving her without an older sibling. The boys without fathers who wished for positive male role models in their lives. The examples are endless.

But what I saw in my community was only the surface. The structure surrounding me influenced what I saw. Educational policies and programs overlook Cambodians (and others who do not meet the "model minority" stereotype) because data on Asian American students are aggregated and fail to display the ethnic diversity of the Asian population. The Philadelphia public schools are under-funded, over-crowded, and lack resources for students from first-generation backgrounds. Families are unable to get out of poverty or low-income situations because they lack the financial capital, education, or connections. It is thus important to acknowledge the structure that is influencing the statistics we read and the lives that underlie them.

Yet here I am now, accomplishing a milestone that hundreds or thousands of other students in my situation are not able to. Most people may hear my story and consider me a "success story" or say that I "beat the statistics." While I am proud of my achievements, it's important to consider the struggles that still exist for me, my family and countless others who aim for the dream of a college education.

There are plenty of challenges people must overcome in order to attain a college education, so I feel like it's a privilege for those who are able to complete it. We should consider how we can use our privilege, since we "made it," in order to help those facing greater obstacles and striving for a promising life. Although I "made it," the disparities still exist. The structure persists and we have the responsibility to address the problems that are occurring, and work towards fixing them.

As I think about the impact I want to have now and after graduation, I am reminded of the verses in Proverbs: "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves; ensure justice for those being crushed. Yes, speak up for the poor and helpless, and see that they get justice" [5]. These verses inspire me to pursue social justice, to give voice to the voiceless, and to dismantle the system. Regardless of religious beliefs, everyone can find a message or motto that resonates with them and can put it into action.

Recent and upcoming college graduates, let's think about the responsibility we have in society and recognize that, in the words of Mahatma Gandhi, we need be the change we wish to see in the world.

Let's make the world a better place.

Rex Yin '14
Contributing Writer

[1] Reeves, T.J. & Bennett, C.E. (2004). *We the people: Asians in the United States*, Census 2000 Special Reports. Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau

[2] Portes, A., & Rumbant, R. G. (2006). Immigrant America: A portrait. Berkeley: University of California Press.

[3] Socolar, P. (2014, January 23). Some improvement in District graduation rate in 2013; college success still limited. Public School Notebook. Retrieved May 11, 2014, from <http://thenotebook.org/blog/146839/some-improvement-district-graduation-rate-2013>

[4] Thayer, P. B. (2000). Retention of Students from First Generation and Low Income Backgrounds.

[5] Proverbs 31: 8-10, New Living Translation

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