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Blue Collar, Black Tie

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Blue Collar, Black Tie

Abstract

Gettysburg pays for half my tuition. The other half, a nearly \$25k, I have to take out every year in loans. I expect to graduate with over one hundred thousand dollars in student loan debt, not including interest. Education, I believe, is the most valuable investment one can make. My sister, a Gburg alum, tells me it's worth it as each summer I agonize over enrollment, continuation of my Gburg education and taking out those loans. The poor, blessed financial aid office must dread my phone call each summer as I stutter through an anxiety attack and try to figure out a relatively uncomplicated process of confirming loans. Neither of my parents know how to do any measure of banking. They are in their 60s. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, education, student debt, poverty

Disciplines

Education

Comments

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

BLUE COLLAR, BLACK TIE

October 15, 2014



Gettysburg pays for half my tuition. The other half, a nearly \$25k, I have to take out every year in loans. I expect to graduate with over one hundred thousand dollars in student loan debt, not including interest. Education, I believe, is the most valuable investment one can make. My sister, a Gburg alum, tells me it's worth it as each summer I agonize over enrollment, continuation of my Gburg education and taking out those loans. The poor, blessed financial aid office must dread my phone call each summer as I stutter through an anxiety attack and try to figure out a

relatively uncomplicated process of confirming loans. Neither of my parents know how to do any measure of banking. They are in their 60s.

I'm the youngest of five. My siblings, my four cousins and I are all first generation college students. The Charles family has a long tradition as blue collar laborers. My father and uncle inherited a family business, one which was in debt and rapidly sinking. I grew up with a part-time nursing mother and a 14 hour a day laboring father. My grandfather, my father, they built their own homes with the help of their other laborer friends. Need someone to do plumbing? I know a guy. Concrete? Roofing? Wiring? I know a guy. These were men who traded their labor within a circle, passing along phone numbers in scribbled handwriting, unable to offer payment in cash but in "I'll do a job for you." Hell, even I know how to do lighting and construction and work as a manual laborer in my hometown. My father knows someone on every street of our town because he's been in their homes laying carpet. He's a beautiful craftsman and is requested by name. He makes less than \$20k a year. Over 40 years of experience, he works in poverty.

I've filled out his bi-weekly partial unemployment forms for the past few years.

At this point in time, my mother is the reason we have any spending ability, but even that is a farce. She makes a healthy income for a single person, but the dual income does not make up for buying braces for us, for the burst housing bubble, for the broken waterline or the hip replacement or double carpal tunnel

surgeries or the emergency ruptured intestines or my sister's repeated reconstructive eye surgeries. After feeding us and making sure we didn't die, there isn't anything left for college.

The summer before my freshman year, I almost dropped out. Talking to some lady in financial aid about tuition, she said "we offer aid assuming that students have a college savings account."

I have no safety net. I'm betting the whole pot on my education. My sister, the Gburg Alum, who has two degrees, who is brilliant, graduated top of her classes with all the accolades and recommendations, lives in poverty. She and I, though separated by 12 years, have haunting similarities. Am I looking at the ghost of Christmas future?

When we hear about teenagers helping their parents with finances, I'm not the stereotype. But I've done that. I'll do it again, by choice and necessity.

I operate under a facade at Gettysburg. I mingle and brush with a crowd of successful people, the black starch of my blazers hiding the uneven red of my neck. I'm not even the poorest student here and I'm living on negative numbers.

25k a year. It almost isn't worth it. But I'm trying my damndest to make it so. A lot of my friends here are in similar positions, absolutely banking on the privileges they're experiencing here to justify this financial venture. That they'll have a great job out of the gate. Gettysburg is a wealth of opportunities. I'm paying for the networking and extra-curricular-resume-buffers and my professor's esteemed letters of rec more than the classes.

I'm paying for Servo.

I'm completely serious when I say that it's revolutionary for me to have access to fruits and vegetables on a regular basis. My mom gets excited when she buys us a bag of apples. With five kids, a bag of apples was gone in a day. It was special. I still think apples are special. I'm trying to fit a lifetime's worth of spinach and raw almonds into four years.

In a lot of discourses, it's recognized that education is the only method for escaping poverty, for generational economic disparity. The dualism we face in America about post-secondary education, particularly our Millennial generation, makes me question my decision to be here everyday. They say: "If you don't go to college, you're not going to get a good job. It's your fault." They say: "Why did you go to college when you can't afford it? It's your fault." I am not buying my way out of poorness. I'm gambling.

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