

DECODING COLLEGE

STORIES, STRATEGIES, AND
STRUGGLES OF FIRST-GENERATION
COLLEGE STUDENTS

KALLIE CLARK



Rowe Publishing

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PREFACE

Why I Wrote This Book

I was raised believing that college was for “those” kids: the ones with the right shoes, the right clothes, and the right social status. My mother did everything in her power to ensure we got the best education possible in the public school system, but when it came to college I was on my own. College representatives would visit my high school and pass around shiny pamphlets filled with images of beautiful buildings and beautiful people, but every time the discussion of tuition came up I would tune out. The idea that this magical thing called financial aid was going to somehow make a \$30,000 a year college affordable was ludicrous to me. The topic of college remained something I avoided, up until the spring of my senior year.

On an otherwise uneventful day my AP English teacher, Ms. Rose, did something that finally made me confront my assumptions about college. As I shuffled into her class I spotted a carefully crafted list on the white board at the front of the room. The first column had each of our names listed alphabetically. The second column was blank except for a single word at the top: college. Slowly as the weeks ticked by that board began to fill up. It seemed like every student in the entire school had a college next to their name but me. It was May of my senior year, and I had missed the application deadlines for most colleges. I was lost, embarrassed, and scared about what my life would look like after high school. One of my closest friends asked her mother what I should do. She insisted that I needed to go to college and told me about a

local state university that might still be accepting applications. I walked my application and transcript into the admissions office, sat down, and waited to hear why I wouldn't be accepted. But I was accepted. I was admitted on the spot. I was going to college.

My mother was proud. My grandmother was actually so impressed she whistled when I told her I was going to a four-year university. I had no idea that I could have done more. As I watched my closest friends go off to Berkeley and Wellesley I began to understand that colleges aren't all the same. I worked full-time at coffee shops to pay my way through school, but life was hard. I was often not able to stay on top of my bills, and there were some days when the only food I ate was the free meal I was allowed during my shift at work—but I trekked on. As my friends graduated four years later, I was still nowhere near graduating. Working full-time had left me exhausted. By the time I completed my bachelor's degree I finally understood what I had missed out on so many years before. I wanted to go back in time and apply to every one of those colleges that looked so magical to me as a senior. I wanted a do-over, but of course there would be no do-over. Instead, I picked myself up and marched on.

Some years later, I moved to Chicago and earned my master's degree. After graduating I began teaching at a local high school. Over the years I moved up in position and eventually became the school's college counselor. I realized that I was really good at problem solving with my students. I felt comfortable being candid with them in ways that many people weren't. I did my absolute best to ensure that no one fell through the cracks—that no one would be in the same boat that I was in back in high school. After several years I knew that I wanted to have an impact beyond the walls of my classroom.

I went back to school (some ten years older than my peers) and earned a master's from The University of Chicago's School of Social Service Administration. I blossomed and

grew beyond measure. The level of support I received was astounding. The professors were invested in my growth and development in ways I never imagined. I felt nurtured for the first time as a student. I gained courage in my abilities, and developed the skills I needed to ultimately be accepted into the doctorate program at SSA. It took me twenty years to finally experience what my friends were able to experience right out of high school. While my road has not been the quickest, or the straightest, it sure has been one heck of a journey.

I am not here to tell you that I have all the answers, or that the road through college (or life for that matter) is going to be easy. In fact, it probably won't be easy. But, I can tell you that earning your college degree is worth every single bump and bruise you endure along the way. I can also offer you this book: a small and mighty collection of resources to help you navigate the college application process and avoid some of the most treacherous pitfalls on your own journey through higher education. When you feel alone or confused, remember you are widening the path to college for those that follow you—for your brothers and sisters, cousins, children, and countless strangers you will never meet. Every step you take leaves footprints on the trail to guide others. You don't need to be perfect. Your path doesn't need to be the quickest or the straightest. Just focus on the road ahead. Take one step at a time. And in the words of a former student of mine, *learn to love the struggle*, for it will lead you to a beautiful place.

INTRODUCTION

Is College For You?

Deciding whether or not you should go to college might feel like a difficult decision, but actually of all the decisions to be made in the college process, this one—I think—is the simplest. If you are asking yourself “Is college right for me?” the answer is very short, and very definitive: yes. Yes, college is for you. College comes in a wide variety of shapes and sizes: everything from a traditional four-year degree to earning a certificate in a technical trade. There is a place for you in college if you want it. The real question is do you want it? And if you don’t, what’s your alternative plan?

There are two types of students who are sure they do not want to go to college: those that have a solid plan after high school, and those that don’t. Students who have a solid plan that does not include college are not necessarily choosing the easy way out. More often than not, these plans include an immense amount of work and dedication in order to reach a very tangible goal, like enrolling in the military. Simply saying that you are going to enroll in the military is not the same thing as having a solid plan. Having a solid plan includes steps like meeting with military recruiters, researching positions within the different branches of the military, understanding the different exam scores required for the positions you are interested in, taking practice exams, and fitting in study time to raise your exam score if necessary. These students are not leaving their future to wishful thinking; they have made a plan and are actively pursuing it.

Students who choose not to go to college, and don't have a plan are—more often than not—just sick of school. This is so unfortunate, because they are making a long-term decision based on a temporary feeling. You are not going to be in school forever. Whether you leave school now or a few years from now, one day you will have your last class, and for the rest of your life you will be in the workforce. Think high school is a pain? Try working in the service industry for thirty years. You can't avoid work. College is work. Not going to college is work. Life is work. Work isn't going away any time soon. If you quit trying to avoid work and start thinking about what you want the rest of your life to look like you will have a much easier time deciding what you really want to do after high school. Every student—regardless of academic ability—should actively decide if college is right for them. It is important that you take responsibility for *choosing* college or *not choosing* college and the immense amount of work that comes along with either decision.

A much more difficult question is what kind of college is right for you. This really boils down to whether you want a certificate, a two-year degree (associate's), or a four-year degree (bachelor's). Obviously, some degrees take longer to earn than other degrees. But, beyond that, each type of degree serves a different purpose. A certificate represents training to learn a limited set of skills within a specific trade. Certificate programs can range from air conditioning and refrigeration repair to pharmaceutical science. It is important to be familiar with the potential career opportunities and limitations with getting a certificate. A certificate in air conditioning and refrigeration might qualify you to work as a service technician, but it might not qualify you to manage the service department. Likewise, a certificate in pharmaceutical science might qualify you to work as a pharmacy technician, but it won't provide the same career (or salary) opportunities as being a pharmacist. Associate's degrees are two-year degrees that have general education coursework and coursework within

a specific area. Associate's degrees can offer more opportunities for career advancement than certificates, and do not take much longer to earn. A bachelor's degree takes longer to earn than an associate's degree; however, it offers the greatest opportunity for career advancement and potential earnings. With a bachelor's degree you can enter into the workforce or pursue an advanced degree such as a master's or a doctorate.

If you were/are a strong student I would argue that a four-year degree is your best bet. The payoff for earning a bachelor's degree is usually much greater than earning an associate's degree or certificate, and it doesn't require much more time. If you have struggled academically in high school you need to figure out why. Were you putting in your full effort and still barely able to keep your head above water? If so, you might want to consider starting at a two-year and transferring to a four year college later on, or earning an associate's degree. Were you capable of a lot more academically but just didn't put in the effort? Then I would argue that you should keep a four-year college on the table and see how the admissions decisions turn out. You might get into a four-year college as a freshman or you might need to start at a community college and get your academics together before you can transfer. Lastly, if you are the kind of student who struggles significantly in school and wants to get to work as soon as possible, then you might consider a certificate program.

If you are feeling pressure to make the "right" college decision, I want to take a moment and reassure you that things will sort themselves out with time. You don't need to have a solid college plan to read this book. In fact, this book was written specifically for students who don't have a solid college plan. As a former college counselor, I know that many public school students do not have access to comprehensive guidance in the college search process. As a first-generation college student, I know first-hand how mysterious and daunting the college search process can be. It's true, applying to college is going to take time and energy, but it's not rocket

science either. Chances are you already have the skills you need to get into a good college; you just need to know the rules of the game. In the next few sections, I am going to lay out step-by-step what you need to do to develop a good college application list. In Section 3 we'll talk briefly about some of the more mysterious aspects of applying to colleges, such as essay writing and financial aid. By the end of our literary journey together, you should be in a pretty solid place to take on your college applications.

Before we get to the nitty-gritty about getting you into college, I think we should take a moment and talk about what that means exactly. If you are reading this book in hopes of learning exactly what you need to do to get into the college of your dreams, I will tell you right now I have no idea. In fact, no one does. Because the college of your dreams today might be different than the college of your dreams two years from now—or even tomorrow! Trying to get into the college of your dreams is a quest that is only going to set you up for failure. Instead, focus on getting into a college that is going to serve you well. If getting into a good quality college becomes your goal, you are much more likely to succeed and reap the benefits of that success.

You should consider a college a good quality college if it does these four things:

- 1** Has a strong graduation rate;
- 2** Will be financially sustainable;
- 3** Will challenge you to grow academically and personally;
- 4** Will provide the supports that you need to be academically and socially successful.