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Family Trailblazers

Susan Gaidos
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Rebecca Conry, who grew up on an Indian reservation, was the first member of her family to go to college and also the first to become a college professor.

Professors like Conry are more numerous than you might think, although their representation has declined as college attendance has risen. Data from the 2006 Survey of Earned Doctorates, an annual census of research doctorate recipients conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, show that in 1976, 44% of doctorate recipients reported that neither of their parents had an education beyond a high school diploma. By 2006, that number was halved to a still-substantial 22%. No one knows how many research doctorate recipients go on to become members of college faculties, but Ohio State University reports that it has 450 or so on a faculty of approximately 3500 on its campuses.

Now a tenured professor at Colby College in Waterville, Maine, Conry has much in common with other professors who, like her, are family trailblazers on college campuses.

"You have to be savvy to all the nuances, the position, the place, and the institution's policies. This can be difficult if you come from a very different culture." --Rebecca Conry

Such faculty members often report feeling like outsiders, alienated from the culture and not knowing the rules. And when they could really use help, they tend to go it alone instead. "Looking back, I never really got the fact that I needed to find a mentor. I just decided I needed to figure it out, and I figured it out on the fly," Conry says.

FINDING THE TRAILHEAD

Conry is not Native American, but she grew up on the Yakama Indian reservation in central Washington. She says she always knew she wanted to go to college; she just didn't know how

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to make it happen. With no family experience or advice to fall back on, she set out to negotiate the maze of applications and scholarships on her own.

Once she got there, it took her a while to settle on a major. "I went in thinking I would be a doctor, but I didn't have the confidence that I would get into medical school. So I chose the nursing track." A defining moment came, she says, when she took her first chemistry course and found herself at the top of the class. "My professor encouraged me to major in chemistry. The rest of the class hated me because I ruined the curve."

Some "serious soul-searching" was required, but Conry took her professor's advice and set her sights on a tenure-track academic career. With what she calls "no real understanding of what graduate school was," she applied to a single institution, the University of Washington, and was accepted.

UNDER THE MICROSCOPE

After making it through graduate school, Conry was surprised to find that the maze of requirements and expectations permeating the academic culture didn't end. On the tenure track, Conry says, she began to feel pressure to "fit in" to the academic environment. She found herself navigating a culture with an unfamiliar set of rules.

"In academics, the big prize is tenure. But if you ask people in any department what it takes to get tenure, they probably can't tell you. The problem is, it's a moving target," she says.

Although teaching and scholarship are generally recognized as "the big two" requirements for tenure, the ability to get along and fit into the academic department is equally important. The hidden, often imperceptible, expectations can catch some first-generation graduates off-guard, Conry says. "You have to be savvy to all the nuances, the position, the place, and the institution's policies. This can be difficult if you come from a very different culture."

By the time she got to Colby, Conry had grown more savvy. But she was late, she says, in picking up on some of these messages during her first tenure-track position, at the University of Nevada, Reno. After 7 years as an assistant professor, she was denied tenure. "It was a split decision. I was close. I just wasn't enough above the bar, and, being different, you get looked at under more of a microscope," she says.

SOCIAL CHALLENGES

Although being a first-generation student may present some unique challenges, it need not stand in the way of success. John T. Groves, Hugh Stott Taylor Professor of Chemistry at Princeton University, says he was the first in his family to attend college. Unfamiliar with the school's orientation process, when it came time to register for classes his father pulled up to 77 Massachusetts Ave. in Cambridge--the front door of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology--and dropped him off. Groves found his way to the registration office and on, eventually, to a named chair at Princeton.

In hindsight, Groves says, he recognizes that his sons, who are both Ph.D. chemists, "enjoyed an abundance of opportunities and experiences" that he never had. "They used to visit me at the laboratory, and one of them did a high school project using a mass spectrometer."



John T. Groves

Because many first-generation graduates come from less affluent families, such socioeconomic differences are common, says Rebecca Lamb, assistant professor of plant cellular and molecular biology at Ohio State University in Columbus and a first-generation college grad. "Many of my peers in graduate school had parents who were college professors or professionals. They often talked about places they had been or research opportunities that

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they had been able to pursue on a volunteer basis."

The routine socializing and networking in an academic community may also cause feelings of insecurity. "The wine, the beer, the fancier foods--when I got out of undergraduate school, I simply wasn't familiar with all that. I don't think anyone went out of their way to make me feel bad. Still, I felt awkward at times and sometimes still do," Lamb says.

Because many of the social cues are subtle--people discussing art films or books with intellectual vigor, for instance--Lamb says finding a way to fit in to a culture that comes with its own set of rules can sometimes be confusing. "I go to artsy movies, too, but sometimes you don't want to admit that you saw the latest shoot-'em-up escapist film."



Struggles to fit in at the new workplace are often matched by struggles to fit in back home, as some first-generation scholars find themselves losing the support of their families. Sheila Smith, assistant professor of chemistry at the University of Michigan, Dearborn, says her family encouraged her to go to college and become a high school teacher "because that was a good career for women."

She entered North Carolina State University on a fellowship that required her to teach in the state's public schools after graduation. But during her sophomore year, Smith got involved in research and discovered that she loved solving problems that people didn't have answers for. When it came time to do her student teaching, she was told she would have to give up her research to fulfill the requirement. "I

had a manuscript in preparation and wouldn't have been able to continue with my project. From then on, I wasn't getting an education degree, I was going to graduate school."

Because her new career path required years of additional study and obligated her to repay the state loan, Smith says, her decision didn't go over well with her family. "My parents didn't go to college, so they expected me to go and instantly get a job making twice as much as my father ever made. Instead, I choose to go to school again. It was a source of great friction between me and my family for a while."

FINANCIAL CHALLENGES

Even with the emotional support of family and peers, first-generation students who come from a background in which money is tight may continue to grapple with the financial aspects of college long after they are awarded a degree.

Although his parents saved to send him and his sister to college, Marcus Chacon, assistant professor of neurology at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, School of Medicine and Public Health, borrowed nearly \$200,000 to complete medical training. "I'm certainly at the higher end of debt of anyone that I know," Chacon says, "and to a certain degree it affects what I can do." He has considered getting some additional training, either through a master's or Ph.D. program, but financially, he says, it's just not feasible.



Chacon comes from a large, extended Hispanic-American family and says concerns about money might also include "background issues" that can bring additional stress while attending school or embarking on a new career. "I've often wondered if there are some of us who worry about how our parents are doing financially. I've seen people in even more extreme situations than myself, who are actually sending money to their parents."

Chacon, who juggles a medical practice and a faculty position, says the medical school administration has been very supportive. The dean and others, he says, have helped him navigate the system and plan for his career. "It was one of the reasons I chose this medical school, and it has been a very valuable resource."

<p>Susan Gaidos is a freelance writer based near Portland, Maine.</p>	<p>Comments, suggestions? Please send your feedback to our editor.</p>
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