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Building the Future – One College Graduate at a Time

May 9, 2012

The past few weeks have been a time of reflection for me. My father died and my family experienced what all families do when they lose the man who provided for them, guided them, protected them, and — in my case — made sure we fully understood the value of a college education.

I'm "third generation" college. My paternal grandmother graduated from college and spent most of her professional life as a teacher who raised her son — my father — as a single parent. My father graduated from college with a teaching certificate after serving in WWII. Like his mother, he was a "non-traditional student". And, although he was never a schoolteacher, he did serve years on the local school board, including a stint as its president.

My parents raised three daughters, all of whom are involved with education: The oldest as superintendent of a public school system in Illinois; the middle one as a long time teacher of the visually impaired who now works for a center that serves other teachers and their visually impaired students; and me — the youngest — who has capped off a university faculty career with several years as a chief academic officer.

None of us are high wealth individuals, but we are comfortable and socially responsible. From grandma, to dad, to my sisters and me, we strive to do our work in ways that uplift others and the communities that we serve. And, the next generation of our family is doing the same.

They are lucky to be the fourth generation of our family to graduate from college. And, I am pleased to report that they truly recognize how fortunate they were to attend residential institutions as traditional students. They are other-oriented adults who live lives of professional accomplishment, civic engagement, and personal meaning. They reflect well on their alma maters and their family.

My family story is an all American story, with strong role models, determination, and access to higher education at the center of all we have become and all that we can contribute.

So, this month, as we gear up for our commencement ceremonies, let's be sure that amid the pomp and circumstance, we remember what it is really all about. Whether in a community college, an adult program, a liberal arts college, a comprehensive university, or a Research I institution, undergraduate education is about transforming individuals and changing the trajectory of family life for generations to come.



It is perhaps the most important thing that gets done in this country. We build the future, one graduate at a time.

Thank God, my father understood this and instilled within us the value of a formal university education and the motivation for life-long learning.

So, if you ever wonder why this CAO who is a three-generation college grad worries so much about access to quality education, now you know. I believe that all US citizens, regardless of demographic category, should have the same access to quality higher education that I had. – Jayne Marie Comstock

In loving memory of my father Richard L. Comstock, 1924-2012