

A Diverse Example of a College Course on Diversity

People sometimes question the value of working while attending college. One hypothesis is that time spent working interferes with academic learning. That hypothesis has some merit. Students working 40 hours or more per week may not have time to complete their assignments. Students working evening shifts may sleep through morning classes. Still, many students are not able to attend college unless they work. I was one of those students. Reflecting on this work/study dilemma, what was the value of my work in the context of my educational aspirations?

When I enrolled at Rockhurst College, I did not have much money. I had earned some spending money by walking cornfields and beanfields the summer before starting college, chopping cockleburs and sunflowers from the corn and beans. I stacked hay bales for neighbors, too, to add a little extra cash. And Rockhurst awarded me a half-tuition scholarship to help defray the overall college costs. But, I needed money to pay for books, room, and board.

One of my first jobs at college was with Saga Food Service, washing pots and pans during and after the evening meal for the minimum wage of \$1.15 per hour. The kitchen was hot and the water for washing the pots and pans scalding at times. Getting off the grease and food that were baked onto the pots and pans was hard work – every bit as hard as chopping those cockleburs and sunflowers and pitching hay bales. My fellow students who served food on the lines in the cafeteria had life much easier from all I could see from my station next to the sink.

Despite the heat and hard work involved, I really enjoyed that job and looked forward to going to work each evening. My colleagues made me like my work. Five of us ruled the kitchen. The leader, though he never formally identified himself as such nor asked us to defer to him as our leader, was the head chef. Two assistant chefs, both female, helped him prepare the food and make sure the serving line workers always had food to serve as needed. I identified those two assistant chefs as the next in rank of the five of us. I shared the sinks with another colleague. I perceived us to be the bottom rank.

I was not good at judging people's ages. Reaching through the five decades since we worked together, I estimate only the following. I was the youngest of the five, being 18 years old. I estimate that the three chefs might have been in their 30s. I simply cannot guess how old my dishpan-washing colleague was.

It does not really matter how old any of us were. What matters is that, as we worked, the five of us carried on a lot of bantering, teasing, and laughing. Social rank was not evident in our interactions. I sensed that we truly liked each other and enjoyed working together.

So what, you might ask? What is the big deal about all of this? The big deal is that my dishpan-washing colleague was African American. The head chef and his two assistant chefs were Native American. One or all had studied at Haskell Indian Junior College (subsequently named Haskell Indian Nations University) in Lawrence, Kansas before securing these jobs at Rockhurst. I was the only Caucasian. These were the first people of color that I had ever met and worked with directly. Occasionally, I had seen African Americans and Native Americans on the streets of Sioux City, Iowa, when I would go down to the city with my parents for doctors' appointments, to shop at the big department stores, or to visit the stockyards with my father. But I was raised in a town that was exclusively Caucasian, where everyone looked like everyone else, and many of the people in my community were not comfortable with people of color. Here at Rockhurst, I learned that my kitchen colleagues were wonderful people. They were not people to fear. They were kind, hard-working, humorous people who extended me their friendship. I learned that work and education were not incompatible; rather they were complementary. Here I was, not only earning some money to pay my college bills, but also getting a wonderful course in diversity – absolutely free. That was true wealth squared as far as I was concerned.

I lost track of these work colleagues when I left Rockhurst College, but I carry them with me even today.