



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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I AM A COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENT

Every day in every way we educators get better and better at what we do: improving and expanding the lives of our students. The reason we do this work is much more important to us than helping the U.S. remain globally competitive or replenishing the middle class—although these are important collateral social benefits of our efforts. I believe that the reason the majority of community college educators do this work is that we are strongly committed to breaking the poverty cycle for great numbers of our students. I know this deeply, as many community college educators do, because I am in my heart and in my background a community college student whose cycle of poverty was broken by caring educators.

I am a community college student because I am the first-generation member of my family to attend college. My three-times married mother did graduate from high school, and my seven-times married father graduated from the 8th grade; but college was not an option for either of my parents. One of 19 grandchildren, I was the first to escape the poverty of my birth by attending college, the only one of four siblings to do so. Except for the \$100 my sister, who is a cosmetologist, gave me from her tips collected in a gallon jar, I received no financial support for college from any member of my family. And there was no advice about what to expect and how to behave in the college environment. I was the first penguin to dive into the shark-infested waters of college, and no member of my family has dared to follow.

I am a community college student because I am from a lower socio-economic background. To be totally truthful I am what our neighbors called “poor white trash”; we aspired to poverty because we were all born in *abject* poverty. It sounds almost elegant to identify myself as coming from “a lower socio-economic background.” For several years my mother and my three sisters and I lived in our uncle’s chicken coop; many years we were farmed out to relatives and other

families in our small town where our poverty was visible for all to see. I worked from the time I was 12 years old—hoeing orange trees for 10 cents a piece and shoveling chicken manure for 50 cents an hour in the acres of chicken coops at Mrs. Matusiak’s chicken farm. The advantage of working at the chicken farm was that I could buy brightly printed cotton feed sacks for a quarter a piece; my mother took in sewing and laundry in addition to cooking at Flora and Ella’s restaurant seven days a week, and she used the feed sacks to make all my underwear and shirts for college. She used to tease me that on the backside of one pair of my underwear appeared the words “100 Pounds of the Very Best.”

I am a community college student because I was totally unprepared for college. There were 15 people in my high school graduating class; there were no foreign languages in my curriculum; 9th-grade algebra was the highest math available; 10th-grade biology was my most advanced science course. The director of my 4-H Club helped me win a scholarship to college, and my high school principal drove me 200 miles from LaBelle, Florida, to Gainesville, Florida, where he found me a job cooking breakfast seven days a week at five in the morning for the University of Florida Fighting Gators. I did not have any idea about what to expect from college, and for some reason I had created in my imagination the image that to go to college I would be required to own a tuxedo—a garment I had never seen except in magazines. I persisted in this dream until my high school principal gave me his old tuxedo, and my mother sacrificed to buy me a pair of black patent leather shoes. Decades later I donated the outfit which I had never worn to Goodwill. I was totally unprepared for college.

The kind of poverty I experienced cuts deep and lasts long. Some of the scars never heal; we just learn to cover them up the best we can. Education helps to plaster over the deprivation, but on occasion the poverty is displayed in a mispronounced word or in a conversation that has reached an awkward limit. I know the painful impact of this kind of poverty, and I see the impact of this kind of poverty in many of our students.



I was fortunate that caring teachers helped me break the poverty cycle into which I was born, and the most important thing I have ever done is to break the poverty cycle for my own two children. My son Kerry and my daughter Erin have many first cousins who still live in poverty; one was murdered, and two are drug addicts who are in and out of jail. But today my son Kerry holds a Ph.D./M.D. and directs the Ph.D./M.D. program at the University of Rochester where he garners millions of dollars for research on Alzheimer's and lectures around the world. His son, my grandson, Colin Padriac is in a Ph.D. program at Chapel Hill and on his way to becoming a researcher like his father. My daughter Erin and her husband Kevin—graduates of Parkland College in Illinois—live a very rich and prosperous life with three beautiful children: my granddaughter Katy is a junior at The University of Texas, Meghan is in a special honor's program at Texas A&M, and Grady is a local baseball star trying to make sense out of puberty. As I said, breaking the poverty cycle for my children is the most important accomplishment of my life; the second most important accomplishment of my life is helping community college students break the poverty cycles in their lives.

For 50 years I have been working in the community college field to do for others what has been done for me. I share that mission and value with many of my community college colleagues who have escaped poverty through the blessings of an education. As first-generation college students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds totally unprepared for college, we are all community college students.

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Terry O'Banion has been working in the community college field for 50 years. He has been recognized with four national awards in his name, written 14 books and over 150 articles, has consulted in over 800 community colleges, and continues today as one of the most active authors and speakers in the community college. Here he has provided a very personal perspective on why he does this work.