

First Generation Interview with Ms. Pam Henderson, Academic Advising Manager (School of Energy Resources)

Question 1: What memories do you have of being a first generation college student? What challenged you and what surprised you?

My memories of being a first generation college student involved being intimidated by the process. And my situation is a little different than most traditional students, I was forty-five years old when I decided to go to college, so I had some world experience under my belt. But even with that, the thought of jumping through the hoops to apply to go to college was intimidating. What challenged me was getting over that fear factor, but once I got into the process, it was like, oh, this isn't as bad as I thought it was going to be.

Question 2: What helped you most in your first year of college? What about the following years, your sophomore, junior and senior year?

The first year it was just having other people in my classes like me. There were other people around my age who had decided to go to school, too, and actually finding that I could make friends with more traditional college students. Just making friends with my classmates and I'm still in contact with some of them today. So that was, I think, a big part of it.

Question 3: What was most helpful for you when you came to the University of Wyoming?

When I came here, there was a bit of that intimidation factor. Again, could I be successful at UW like I had been at the community college (Laramie County Community College) and I discovered that I could. I had a friend who was going here, too. She was going to school part-time so I could talk to her a lot about what it was like to take classes. But just getting to know people was a big help with it.

Question 4: How did you find your path as your chosen field and your job?

I majored in business administration. I had worked in the insurance industry for 28 years and decided I'd had enough of insurance. I thought, well, I'll get my business degree and maybe go do something else in business. In that process, I started interacting with the advisors in the College of Business and I went actually, this is a really cool job.

Did I plan on becoming advisor when it came to UW? No, I did not. But I have found that it is very satisfying to work with those students, see them succeed when that light bulb turns on and they're going, "yeah, I get this now." And showing them how to study, showing them how to manage your time. The most satisfying part of the job is when they cross that stage at commencement. And yep, and they have a job and they're ready to move on with their life. So it was a process. And yes, major does not equal career. Definitely.

Question 5: What do you wish first generation students knew when they came to UW?

I wish that they knew that we're here to help them. I think as an adviser, if they would find that one person that they're comfortable talking to, whether it's an advisor or an instructor, another student, maybe a sophomore who's a first generation student like this idea of that learning and living community for a first generation since I think is going to be a tremendous advantage for that group. I think that is the biggest thing find one person on campus you're comfortable with - that's what we are here to do.

Question 6: What is a common struggle you notice among first year students, particularly for first generation students?

I think financially it's a big struggle for them. They don't understand that mom and dad may not understand it. I think just learning how to complete the FAFSA and all of the other financial aspects may be a challenge.

Question 7: What are some of the changes you noticed between freshman and sophomore years?

They grow up a lot, they do. In just gaining that confidence after their first year and then that comfort with knowing, I can be successful. And hopefully they're getting the support from home that they need with that too.

Question 8: What advice would you give first generation students that you are advising?

Don't be afraid to ask questions. If you've got issues or concerns, we're not going to think you're stupid. There is no such thing as a stupid question. Let us know if you've got an issue or concern. If there's something you're not comfortable with come in and talk to us about it. So just come and talk to us. That's the big thing.

Question 9: What resources are available to students in your field, in your school?

Our advising center. We just started our advising encouraged center last year. It's been very successful. We've hired another advisor, so we're actually able to provide more services. So we do the academic advising along with a career advising piece. We work with our students on how to write a resume, how to dress for an interview, we're going to start doing mock interviews so that they are comfortable with that process of applying to internships and ready to apply for the job.

Question 10: Are there any stories that come to mind of any first generation students in the past few years you got to know in or outside of your academic advising?

I had one who graduated in May and I didn't know until he graduated that he was first generation. And the reason we found out about it is because he had decorated his cap and said, "First one to graduate" in his family. And I said I didn't realize that you were first generation. But now, reflecting back on that, he asked a ton of questions. And I think that probably he was very proactive with his academic career and making sure he stayed on track. And I think he took ownership of it. And so I think for students, he would be a great example of how to manage your academic careers as a first generation student.

Question 11: Any advice you would add for first year, first generation students?

You're going to be stepping outside your comfort zone and you may get some comments from your family. But if this is something you really want to do stick with it, we're here to help you.

*Interview conducted at the University of Wyoming by Heather E. Webb Springer on August 3, 2019.
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