

PAM HENDERSON

My name is Pam Henderson and for many years I worked as the Academic Advising Manager for the School of Energy Resources here at the University of Wyoming. One of my first memories of being a first-generation college student was how intimidated I felt by the process of applying to college. My situation was slightly different, in that I spent 28 years in the insurance field before going back to school as a nontraditional student. I quickly realized it was not as bad as I thought it was going to be. In the first year having other nontraditional students helped me feel comfortable, but I was also able to make connections with students of all backgrounds. Getting to know people in and outside of classes was by far the most helpful thing to me while attending university.

I majored in Business Administration because I felt that something in business was the change of pace I needed. Through interactions with my advisors I began to be interested in the field and found myself thinking what a cool job it was. I always make the point to tell people that a major does not always equal career. Once becoming an advisor I found great satisfaction in seeing my students have lightbulb moments and watching them walk across the stage at commencement.

Something I wish first generation students knew before coming to campus is that there are so many people on campus to help you. I cannot stress enough the importance of finding someone you are comfortable talking to, whether that be a peer, professor, or an advisor. A common struggle I see with first year students, but primarily first generation students, is the financial burden of college. Both the students and their parents are sometimes unaware of the extent of college expenses, and becoming financially knowledgeable can be difficult. Although the biggest changes I see in the transition between freshman and sophomore year is the boost in confidence and the growth of knowledge they had in their ability to be successful.

Being an advisor myself, I have lots of advice for first generation students in regards to advising. The biggest thing is to not be afraid to ask questions. One of my advisees was first generation and he was very successful because he was proactive, asked a lot of questions, and took ownership of his own degree path. No advisor will think you are stupid and being vocal about any concerns you have is really important. It is also good to know the resources that are available to you and utilize them. Specifically the advising centers, where you can learn anything from how to write a cover letter or resume, get help with interviews, and find comfort in applying for internships and jobs.

I would like to leave first generation students with one piece of parting advice: by attending college you are going to be stepping outside of your comfort zone and that will be challenging at times, but stick with it and we are always here to help you.