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

Pam Henderson My name is Pam Henderson, I am the academic advising manager with the School of Energy Resources.

Heather What memories do you have of being a first generation college student? And then what challenged you and what surprised you?

Pam Henderson 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. I started out at Laramie County Community College first because I didn't want to tackle UW, but I'm glad I did it that way because it got my feet wet and I realized that I could, that I could handle it. 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. You know, you can build that up in your mind. And it was fine once I got here and actually transferred to UW was not as bad as I thought it was going to be either, it was okay we're good. It was a really pretty seamless for me.

Heather What helped you most in your first year of college? And then what about the following years, your sophomore, junior and senior year?

Pam Henderson 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. Some of them would say, "Oh you're the same age as my mother." And I was like well, but that's okay with that, that I was accepted by the younger students as well as being a part of the other students who were in my age group within it. It helped a lot to have that support. And it got to the point where some of the younger students would come and ask me questions. Not always good, but they would ask me questions about how are you studying or how come your grades are so good? Or I would get accused of screwing up the curve or messing up the curve. Not necessarily, but it was, I think, 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.

Heather And then what about after you came to UW? So that was probably your junior year.

Pam Henderson Yeah.

Heather So what was maybe most helpful for you when you came here (to UW)?
**Pam Henderson** 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 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. And, you know, that helped a lot. I was working here at UW part-time in the Ag College and so just getting acclimated to the whole environment. It took a couple of weeks to do that. But just getting to know people was a big help with it.

**Heather** How did you find your path as your chosen field and your job?

**Pam Henderson** 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. And when the School of Energy Resources was formed, I thought what an opportunity to get in on the ground floor to start a new unit. That doesn't happen very often. So at the time they had an office associate’s position. I applied for it and they hired me. And so through the years, I've been a part of developing the undergraduate program that we have and actually working into becoming an advisor. 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.

**Heather** What do you wish first generation students knew when they came to UW?

**Pam Henderson** 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. But even just making sure you know who your academic advisor is and that you're comfortable working with them and know that they can be a resource. I think that is the biggest thing find one person on campus you're comfortable with and that you can say, hey, look, I've got this question, mom and dad don't know. That's what we are here to do.

**Heather** What may be common struggle is do you notice among first year students, particularly for first generation students?

**Pam Henderson** 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 all the
FAFSA and all of that kind of thing, that always seems to be I, I had one who her parents just did not understand the financial aid process and working with her. I think that is, I think that paying for school is always a big challenge for that group too, I think. It's a concern that I have seen.

Heather What are some of the changes you noticed between freshman and sophomore years?

Pam Henderson They grow up a lot, they do. In just gaining that confidence after their first year gone. I can do this. I can be successful. 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.

Heather What advice would you give first generation students that you are advising that are coming in to meet with you?

Pam Henderson 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 because we can sometimes just the act talking out will help you decide which way you go. So just come and talk to us. That's the big thing.

Heather What resources are available to students in your field, in your school?

Pam Henderson 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. So 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 then you're ready to apply for the job. So they're prepped for that type of thing.

Heather 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?

Pam Henderson 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 and his family. And I said I didn't realize that you were first generation because he never acted that way. 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, because, boy, he was all about the questions and looking back on that it's like I wish you would've known sooner he as first generation, but he did well. And he has a job now working for Tri-State down in Colorado. So, yeah, he's very good.

Heather And any advice you would add for first year, first generation students?

Pam Henderson 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.