ACHIEVING THE DREAM

A How-to Guide for Adult Women Seeking a College Degree

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FOREWORD

by Dr. Lynn Pasquerella

Dr. Lynn Pasquerella is a philosopher who is committed to women’s education and whose career has combined teaching and scholarship with local and global engagement. Dr. Pasquerella is a graduate of Quinebaug Valley Community College, Mount Holyoke College, and Brown University. In 2010, her alma mater, Mount Holyoke College, appointed her as its 18th president. After serving six years as president of Mount Holyoke, she will assume the presidency of the Association of American Colleges and Universities on July 1, 2016.

The summer I graduated from high school, I managed to escape the factory work I had done alongside my mother the previous summer, only because I received funding under the federal Comprehensive Employment and Training Act. At the time, CETA funds were reserved for high school students who were at risk of permanent unemployment due to extreme economic and social disadvantages. That fall, I continued working 35 hours a week under a CETA grant while attending a local community college that had just opened up in the small, rural town in which I lived. I had decided to forgo a full scholarship to my state’s flagship university in order to serve as a caregiver for my mother, who had become chronically ill. Two years later, I transferred to Mount Holyoke College and within another two years was headed off to Brown University for my Ph.D.
When I graduated, I vowed that I would never forget the lessons I learned in my transition from community college to the Seven Sisters and the Ivy League. As a result, throughout my career, I have been committed to promoting access to excellence in higher education, particularly for women; to championing the centrality of liberal learning; and to defending political scientist Benjamin Barber’s notion of colleges and universities as “civic missions.” Barber’s Jeffersonian contention is that neither education nor research can prosper in an unfree society, and schooling, he thinks, is society’s most promising—perhaps its only—way of producing citizens who will uphold freedom. Yet Barber goes beyond Jefferson by suggesting that we “not only have to educate every person to make [her] free, but we have to free every person to make [her] educable.” While there has been a good deal of rhetoric regarding the principle of universal access to higher education as an essential symbol of our nation’s commitment to equality of opportunity, the reality is that many of our citizens still have “closed futures” and consequently are, in a very real sense, unfree. Achieving the Dream attempts to redress the growing economic segregation in higher education, but it does much more: It also highlights the personal purpose of higher education, which provides a framework for grappling with and understanding the most fundamental questions of human existence.

My own story is illustrative. Among the courses I signed up for during my first semester of college, with the help of a Pell Grant and a Perkins Loan, was an American literature class. There weren’t many students in that class; most enrolled in courses that more easily translated into better jobs—or any job at all. It was held in a church basement across town from the administrative offices of the college, which were in trailers housed at a regional technical high school. Despite the lack of a physical campus, there was a true sense of community derived from the experience of embarking on a common endeavor.

One evening, my literature professor arranged for us to take a trip to Hartford for a performance of All the Way Home, a Pulitzer Prize-winning play by Tad Mosel. I had
never attended a professional theater production before, and Hartford was a world away—known to me only as the place to which my father traveled nightly on a third-shift bus to work as a welder at Pratt and Whitney. I remember being dressed in a blue velveteen jumpsuit (it was the '70s, after all) and piling into a car with my classmates. When the lights dimmed, I was transported. In the dark—perhaps especially in the dark—I felt part of something important. Surrounded by classmates, I stared ahead at the stage and waited for what I could not yet see.

After the play, our class went for Chinese food and talked. The performance had raised so many big questions about faith, grief, and trust. We discussed the last act, when a wife mourns her husband’s unexpected death. “I hoped he loved being,” she said, recognizing the possibility that he may never have realized his own strength and potential.2

What that evening taught me, and why I remember it after all these years, is that we all have a right to experience “being.” We are each entitled to live in our strength. We each deserve opportunities to find our best and most authentic selves.

*Achieving the Dream* provides a road map for women to not only find their best and most authentic selves, but also to be trailblazers in their own lives. As leaders of women's colleges, President Leary and I know that to be a trailblazer requires scanning the landscape before you and making decisions about either taking the most efficient path or the one that hasn't yet been carved out. With either route, a trailblazer faces a thicket of obstacles: a society that often treats you as invisible, a world that calls into question your right to demand justice, and a culture that tries again and again to place hurdles in your way—blocking your progress, draining your energy, and forcing you always to look down at what is making you stumble instead of looking up at the horizon in front of you. This book is about clearing away the brush so that trailblazers—like you—can keep your eyes on the limitless vista ahead.
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