

The Unintentional Impact of a Stranger's Comment

My journey from high school dropout to community college management

Amy Sikora · Oregon Women in Higher Education

It was 1995 in Phoenix, Arizona, and I was at work, sitting on a stool in a plastic factory, bored out of my mind. My sole job was to move a piece of plastic out of a box, place it into a machine, press a button, and put the finished piece into another box. It was monotonous work, fitting, at least in my mind, for a high school dropout like myself. In fact, I was a two-time high school dropout.

I dropped out the first time during my junior year because I decided it would be more enlightening to hitchhike around the West Coast with my boyfriend. I dropped out a second time during my senior year because I hated the social scene. From my perspective, I had seen too much of the world to care about proms, homecomings, or any of the other things high school students were supposed to care about. That's right, I was too cool for school.

The straight-A student I once was would not have recognized the pierced face and orange mohawk staring back at me in the mirror. For reasons that made sense only to my adolescent self, school was no longer a good fit. Singing in a punk band felt like a better option, along with hitchhiking to New Orleans. I was also deeply passionate about a variety of political causes and often found myself participating in protests.

That passion made me feel compelled to share my beliefs loudly, either screaming about them in my band or shouting slogans at rallies. One day, while holding a sign and yelling my politics at a protest, an older man walking by stopped, looked at me, shrugged, and said, "Eh, what do you know about the world? You're just a kid, and you don't even seem to know a whole lot about much of anything."

Ouch.

That comment hit hard, largely because it felt painfully accurate.

The next day, I decided I was going to prove that man wrong. Nothing motivated me more than being told I could not do something, or that I was not worth listening to. I quit my job at the plastic factory and decided to go to college.

I drove to my local community college and asked what I needed to do to get started. I was shocked to learn that I had to pass a GED exam before I could even enroll in college-level

courses. I took a study packet home with me and scheduled the test for the following week. Fortunately, I passed, earned my GED, and was officially on my way.

Once I started taking college classes, I was hooked. In fact, I wanted to get others registered too. I took a job in the call center of the Admissions and Registration Office and worked there throughout my community college career. I stayed on even after earning my Associate of General Studies degree and transferring to a university.

I chose the AGS degree simply because I loved taking classes and could not decide on a major. When I eventually transferred, they made me pick one. I asked an advisor what I was closest to completing, and he said sociology. That was good enough for me.

As graduation approached, my piercings slowly came out and my hair returned to a natural color, though I was still playing in the band. After earning my bachelor's degree, I took a position in Student Services at a proprietary graduate school. There, I worked with students from enrollment through graduation. I served as registrar, bursar, graduation technician, event coordinator, international student immigration advisor, collections representative, counselor, and more. It was a very different experience from the community college environment, but it taught me invaluable lessons about corporate culture in the for-profit education world.

Eventually, I left that role, moved to Nevada, and took a break from higher education to help with family obligations. During that time, I started a freelance writing business, submitting regular pieces to various magazines and writing search-engine-optimized content. While enjoyable, I missed working with students and found the work less fulfilling.

When I later moved to Oregon, I accepted a position at a nonprofit foundation working in scholarships. I read essays and interviewed scholarship applicants, and I was continually amazed by their stories. Seeing firsthand how removing financial barriers could transform a student's educational path was deeply inspiring. That understanding only grew when I later worked in financial aid at a community college.

In that role, I gained a deeper appreciation for how critical financial aid is to student success. Some days were joyful, and others were heartbreakingly sad. I met students navigating poverty, addiction, abusive relationships, job loss, parenthood, caregiving responsibilities, and more. Watching them persist, and succeed, was incredibly rewarding.

From there, I moved into academic advising at a university, working with engineering students. The role was challenging but meaningful. I believed my job was to teach students how to fish, to help them learn how to navigate the institution independently rather than providing every answer. While there, I helped develop a successful peer mentor program and completed my master's degree.

Today, I serve as an Assistant Director in Admissions and Registration at Linn-Benton Community College. I do not meet with students as frequently as I once did, but my work impacts them in broader ways by improving systems and processes that support entire groups at once.

Over time, my roles have evolved, but my passion for higher education has remained constant. I still think about that man at the protest. I would like to thank him for lighting the fire that pushed me toward college and ultimately changed my life.

Take it from this former mohawked punk kid factory worker, you never know how your passing comments might affect another person's life or self-identity. Choose your words carefully, but do not be afraid to tell it like it is. You just might inspire someone to find their path to higher education.