APPENDIX A

The Journey Begins in Childhood

Note: Originally written as the first chapter of the book, this content was removed to sharpen the book's intended focus on higher education. It is included here as background.

The journey to becoming successful in any career begins at birth and in the earliest school years. Ideally, to understand today's entering college students we need to know as much about their early years as possible. Many of them had experiences in elementary or secondary school that in college we either need to redress or supplement with experiences they should have had, but didn't, most frequently for no responsibility of their own.

We need to always be mindful that none of our students got to choose their parents. Hence the initial responsibility for how our students turn out is someone else's! I start with this point because all too frequently when I am working with college educators to better understand why we are not seeing better student success outcomes, I hear a litany of student characteristics that hold the students overwhelmingly responsible for how they perform—or don't perform. Of course, students must ultimately be responsible. But we know very clearly that many of the challenges we face in this work—in the ways that students present themselves to us—are not ways for which the students were originally or primarily responsible. It matters enormously where in the United States you were born, grew up, were educated, literally your ZIP code. Who were your parents? What were their financial means and educational attainment levels? To de-emphasize these factors and to primarily focus on what students can or can't do, is largely what I would call "blaming the victim." My career response to this has been to say, "What can institutions then do to take more responsibility for student learning and success?" I want to repeat this. What I am arguing for is a counternarrative to blaming the students by asking, "How can institutions (through their policies, practices, people, pedagogies) take more responsibility for student success?"

My Beginnings: The Luck of the Draw

In my case, I ultimately won the lottery. I wasn't born into wealth, privilege, or advantage, but, through no agency of my own, shortly after birth I ended up in the lap of affluence, literally.

I learned just several years ago some of the circumstances of my birth and subsequent adoption. I had known since I was a small boy that I had been adopted at about 6 months by the two adults who I always knew as my parents. My adoptive mother's constant line to me about this was: "We chose you. We wanted you!" And I believe she meant it even though she frequently didn't act congruently with that claim. And who was she? She was one of three children whose father had owned a hat manufacturing company in Danbury, Connecticut, and who had grown up in a home with live-in servants and residence for part of the year on a yacht. The family also had a summer residence, a "cottage" with seven bedrooms and servants' quarters. In her early adult years, she married a man of great wealth, the heir to part of the fortune amassed by the German engineering family who built the Brooklyn, George Washington, and Golden Gate Bridges. She ultimately divorced him and was living large on a huge divorce settlement at the time when she married my adoptive father, a man with an up-and-coming career as an executive in corporate America. Once they adopted me, they moved out of New Jersey to what is now the fabulously wealthy Fairfield County, Connecticut, and our town of New Canaan, Connecticut. Thus, when I grew up my models for adult men were executives in expensive suits, carrying briefcases, dashing off to the commuter train in the morning, and returning tired and burnt out in the evenings in search of multiple cocktails. In our household the drink of choice was an extra-dry martini (I could make one for my parents at age 5).

I grew up at frequent cocktail parties in our home learning all kinds of behaviors—what we now refer to as "social capital." My father went to college as an athlete (football player) at Dartmouth and was a fraternity man. In a rare self-confession for him, he admitted to me that he partied and drank too much and was "invited" to leave and ended up at Clark University. He never did graduate because he had to drop out in the year of "The Crash," in 1929, to go to work to support his recently widowed mother. This was 6 years before the Democrats drove through Congress the adoption of the Social Security Act on August 8, 1935. His mother had nothing to live on as her late husband's business (an electric sign company) had been wiped out by The Crash and ensuing Great Depression—at which point he died. While my parents would never elaborate, it has always been my suspicion that he took his own life, leaving my father as a survivor who was stuck with the support of his mother. He ultimately achieved what would be almost unheard of today without a college degree, namely a very senior lucrative corporate, executive-level job. He spent 43 years with his company, which led him to advise me for the rest of his life: “Son, you have to find a good company and stick with it!” That was possible then. Companies did have in many ways a social conscience and took care of their own. Loyalty was sought and rewarded. That was my model and I emulated it. It is not one that is adaptive now, as I must confess to my students. In rare moments he would confess to me that if he could go back and do college all over again, he would have majored in English and become a writer. Thankfully, I have no such regrets about what I did or didn’t major in at college.

As for my adoptive mother, she never had employment of any kind outside the home during the period I lived at home. She had not gone to college and instead went to what was known as “finishing school.” She gave me rigorous daily instruction in what she referred to as “manners”—again, providing all kinds of social capital. Most importantly, she was an unhappy, unpredictable, verbally aggressive drunk. Therefore, this puts me into a neatly understandable category: I am an ACOA—adult child of an alcoholic. While that isn’t all you need to know about me to have me pegged, it was and still is very significant.

My mother and father wanted to have children but were not successful, so after 6 years they decided to adopt. They adopted me, and a year and a half later adopted another child, a girl. Then, about 6 years later, they had their first and only natural child, another son.

Until 2 years ago I knew absolutely nothing about my biological parents. But I finally got my courage up to obtain what information I could legally have about my biological origins. I learned how different my life could have been. Instead of being leveraged for all the advantages society can accord children of privilege, my birth parents would have positioned me very differently. My biological mother was 15 at the time I was born, outside of wedlock of course. She had been in a relationship with a 17-year-old partner (my father) for 2 years. And it was February 1944—the darkest days of World War II. Apparently, he had just gone into the U.S. Navy, at only 17, and given that many of the youngest of our draftees or volunteers became “cannon fodder,” it is remarkable that he did survive World War II. I frequently think about how different my life would have been had they kept me and raised me. I would surely not have been writing anything like what I am laying out here. Instead, I grew up with, literally, a silver spoon in my mouth, that rested on a sterling silver highchair tray, which sits in my kitchen today.

There are other salient details about what I had to address to become the student success educator that I am today. First, my parents were devoted to the Republican party, at least as it was then and up to the mid 70s. Growing up I had never heard a good word at home or anywhere in my very Republican town about Democrats, who were characterized as terrible people who supported labor unions that my father had to negotiate against in his own work as a senior manufacturing executive whose workers were members of the United Steelworkers of America. He believed many Democrats were really communists, whom he despised. It wasn't until I took my first history course in college that I ever heard a positive statement about any Democrat. President Franklin Roosevelt was a particular devil derided in our home.

My parents sent me off to college with all kinds of learned prejudice. They were equal opportunity discriminators: against Catholics, Italians, Jews, "colored people," and Whites of lower social status than ours (people who hadn't really "amounted to anything," as my father used to say). So as my adolescent rebellion against them began, I dated several Jewish girls: a girl whose father was a machinist in a factory and who had a Syrian mother (she was truly smart and beautiful!) and had a long "steady" relationship with a young Catholic woman. For that relationship my father punished me during college by cutting my "allowance" by 50%! But I am getting ahead of myself here. My family background in terms of socioeconomic status and privilege was a set up for my formal educational experiences, and I had to unlearn those influences to be a successful student success educator.

In fairness, I should say my father did have many positive influences on me. He was an incredibly hard worker and loyal to his employer. He even loved his employer, as I did ultimately mine, the University of South Carolina. As I've said before, he used to tell me "Son, you need to find a good company and stick with it!" He was honest in everything, stylishly dressed, particularly on weekends for cocktail parties. On weekdays he wore nothing but Brooks Brothers suits. He was very gregarious, outgoing, sociable, a very good conversationalist, an avid reader, and had all kinds of social graces and capital, which I attempted to master for myself. He also loved to write, something he taught me.

An Educational Foundation: Grade 1

In grade 1 I learned how painful it can be for students when they believe they are the only ones who "don't get it." For me, grade 1, for at least a half year, was best summarized by "I don't get it." I was the slowest learner in the class. I wasn't learning to read at the rate the other kids were or following any directions that were put on the board. I could see how much more rapidly my classmates were grasping things, and I felt deeply ashamed and inadequate. I will never forget that feeling.

But grade 1 also gave me my first lesson in student success. The educator must be vigilant, monitor and understand student behaviors, and know when and how to intervene. This is not a laissez-faire line of work. Specifically, my grade 1 teacher, Mrs. Stone, finally intervened and called in the school nurse to do a preliminary visual acuity screening. The findings weren't surprising: I couldn't see a thing written on the board. But I didn't know I wasn't seeing and that all the other kids were. So, the school got my parents to get me to an ophthalmologist, who promptly prescribed glasses to correct for severe nearsightedness, and I have worn glasses ever since. I almost gave them up in college one day when the campus homecoming queen walked by a table at which I was seated in the student union. I had taken off my glasses for a fleeting moment. She stopped and asked, "John Gardner is that you? I didn't recognize you. You know you are pretty good looking without your glasses!" When I finally became a teacher myself, I found I was constantly looking for the kids who didn't get it and were desperately needing what we now call an "intervention."

Thanks to that teacher who got me glasses and taught me how to read, I made a huge empowering discovery: Education is all about being able to move from being a dependent learner and person to an independent learner and person! In grade 1, really, you say? Yes, absolutely. Up until that point I had to be dependent on my mother to read to me, which didn't always fit well with her heavy drinking routines and schedule. Once I learned to read for myself, I didn't need her to read to me anymore. One of the most important lessons in student success work is showing how students can move themselves from dependence to independence in college by helping them realize they can think for themselves. They can discover, evaluate, and use information once they become information literate. They don't have to be constantly told by others what to think and how to do this or that. They can now figure that out for themselves. In grade 1, I learned to love the children's section of the local public library where the librarians got to know me. And I even started my own home library—another good influence of my father. He wanted me to have my own library because he had one. Each of us three children were expected to have our own "library." And this element of family culture was combined with no television—I never had one in my home as a child. Finally, when the last kid left home for college, my parents got not just one TV but three. Mission accomplished. Don't ruin the intellectual curiosity of your children with the idiot box, or so they thought anyway, and I tend to agree.

Self-Discovery of Strengths Is a Cumulative Process: Grades 2 and 3

Every student has a unique strength—we educators just need to help our students find it. Thankfully, my second-grade teacher, Mrs. Freeman, when I was a kid who *never* got picked for recess school yard games of kickball, finally found something I could do. Thanks to her, I could spell! Think about it: Spelling is a key foundation of being able to communicate effectively in writing and mastering one's native language. But first she had to get my attention. She was formidable looking, a sterner version of both my grandmothers. When she would totally run out of patience with me, she would grab my hair and shake it and my head. It did not feel good. Finally, she resorted to something else.

She introduced a spelling game, Anagrams, to be played by the entire class, most days right after lunch. This is a form of what we would call today "active learning." Anagrams was akin to a more contemporary game probably known by many of my readers: Scrabble. It was a competitive game and involved every student at some level. In a very short time, I became the undisputed class champion. I was a pathetic kickball player shunned by my peers, but they couldn't come close to me as spellers. I didn't know yet what the life lesson was in that, but I did experience a gain in self-esteem—although, again that is language used in retrospect as an adult. Thinking like the kid I was, I do recall feeling like I could finally do something really well. Thank you, Mrs. Freeman!

The Power of Early Multicultural Experiences: Grades 4 Through 8 in Canada

When I was 9, my father broke the news to the family that we were "moving," what I came to understand was a "corporate relocation" move. His U.S. company was "transferring" him to lead a Canadian subsidiary, which he would do for 5 years. I didn't know it initially, but this move was another example of privilege, not so much because of his increased earning power through corporate advancement, but because living in the wonderful country of Canada provided me with a 5-year multicultural experience that became a lifelong influence.

The first thing I noticed was a gender difference in the public school system faculty: I had male teachers! I had never seen a male teacher previously in my U.S. schooling. And for grades 4 through 7 all my teachers were male.

My Canadian elementary school was like many U.S. rural schools used to be and a few still are: Multiple grades and hence students of differing ages and maturity levels shared the same classroom. In my case, I had a male teacher for both grades 5 and 6 in the same classroom. He had also been my teacher in grade 4, where he discovered that he could have my undivided attention after administration of what was the school equivalent of being put in the stocks—namely, being removed from the classroom and made to stand in the corner of a hallway facing into the wall with the prohibition not to look at or talk with other students. But with my behavior having been suitably modified now in grade 5, this same teacher observed that I did my work more rapidly than my peers and would then communicate rapt attention to what the older students were doing in the higher grade. After several months the teacher, Mr. Collier, decided to formalize what I was doing unofficially, and he made me officially both a fifth- and sixth-grade student. This, in effect, became "skipping" a grade, and hence at the end of that year I was promoted directly from the fifth to the seventh grade. What did I learn from this? I learned that I could learn more and be more successful when I pushed myself beyond other *students and* when I had a cooperating teacher who was equally invested in pushing me and letting me learn at my own pace. Thank you, Mr. Collier! I remember his first name, Norm for Norman, and the university crest he wore on his dapper double-breasted blazer signifying he was a graduate of McMaster University!

My second Canadian male teacher, Mr. Bruce Witten, taught seventh grade. He was terrific as a teacher, explainer, motivator, and driver, even though at times he terrified me and all my classmates by his threats to use corporal punishment with an object of terror he termed "the stick." He used it on other students but never me. He was thorough, articulate, and meticulous in everything he did, including his dress. He was stylish, unlike any of the other teachers. He lived in Toronto and commuted about 100 miles round trip by public bus to and from our elementary school. He loved to play the piano, which he did once in a while for us. For reasons that were not fully explicable or understandable to me at the time, all I could conclude was that I really learned from him and just appreciated that he was different. Looking back, I suspect I was experiencing my first Renaissance man and my first gay teacher. My experience as his student probably contributed to my capacity for acceptance of differences far more than I realized at that time.

I made other discoveries in elementary and middle school (in addition to prepubescent girls). One was that, unlike American students, Canadian students were interested in and knowledgeable about what was going on in the United States. In Canadian classrooms, we were required to follow news events, read newspapers, and discuss current events. In the United States, had I still been there, that would not have been happening.

I learned what I will now put in adult language: We Americans are much more "ethnocentric" than Canadians. The world revolves around us. We only need to know about us. Consequently, most Americans, even to this day, know very little about Canada. But Canadians know a great deal about us. We matter to them. Jointly we have the longest formerly undefended border in the world. I remember that even the parents of my male friends would engage me in discussion about current events, especially those involving the United States.

During my time in elementary school, the U.S. government took two policy actions that were perfectly within its rights to do, but which offended Canadian policymakers and adult citizens. Canadian elementary school kids also knew about these two actions. One was the failure of the United States to support, in the United Nations, the British, French, and Israeli invasion of Egypt in 1956 in retaliation for Egypt's nationalizing the Suez Canal. The Canadians, loyal members of the British Commonwealth that they were, supported the British foreign policy in opposition to the U.S. government policy. The other policy dispute between the United States and Canada, also in 1956, surrounded the financing of what was known as the Trans Canada Pipeline, which raised all kinds of nationalistic questions about the influence of U.S. wealth on Canadian government policy. This all came home to me one day in 1956 when I was beat up on the school ground by a group of Canadian boys who were riled up by the fever pitch of Canadian nationalism provoked by U.S. foreign policy. I went home licking my wounds, the greatest of them being the realization that not everyone loved Americans like me. This gave me a whole new perspective on what it meant to be an American.

In U.S. colleges today we have to explain to some of our students that the world they will be entering as working adults represents a "global" economy. Their country, their employers, and their customers are connected globally, and, thus, their college educations need to teach a global perspective that they probably didn't acquire in K–12 education. In Canada, I didn't have to wait until I went to college. I was taught a global sense of awareness in all 5 years of my schooling through the study of one subject primarily: geography—and not just the geography of Canada (which most Americans know nothing about), but world geography. Thus, without realizing it, by having the privilege of being the son of an "expat" executive, I was being prepared to function globally with the discipline of geography being one of my influencers. It would be years before I could see how this would help me working with all my college students from non-U.S. cultures.

During that same period, I also experienced how international conflict can influence the thinking of school children who may be geographically far away from the world's armed conflicts. In 1956–1957 the whole world was gripped by the courage of demonstrators in the Soviet-occupied countries of Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, who battled it out in the streets with Russian tanks. Children my age threw Molotov cocktails at the tanks and paid for this action with their lives. Canada's typically generous response was with a far more liberal immigration policy than that of the United States, and it threw its doors open to refugees from these conflicts. Some of those children ended up in my elementary school, in my class, and their stories enthralled me. I couldn't imagine my government—either in the United States or Canada attacking me with its troops and tanks, and especially me taking to the streets to do battle with them.

What also stuck with me—and does to this day, was the unreserved, unqualified openness to immigrants and the celebration of their joining us. Unlike in my U.S. classes, I was now in school with "immigrants," and that became my unquestioned new normal. And I have never been the same since. In retrospect, of course, I came to understand that both countries, the United States and Canada, were settled by immigrants but that one is much less ambivalent than the other about the legitimacy and importance of the immigrant experience. I know this influenced me at a preadolescent age because my values were formed as I played with these children, visited their homes, and met their parents. While I never could have the same experience of throwing a Molotov cocktail against a Russian tank in the streets of Budapest, I was at least learning the skills of empathy that any student success educator must have.

I also had two experiences in Canada that, unbeknownst to me, brought me privilege and advanced me intellectually and in gaining social capital. One was attending 2 years of Mrs. Rankin's Ballroom Dancing School. No, this experience did not advance me intellectually! And the second, which I explore in chapter 2, was being a student in one of Canada's most elite schools for affluent males, which did truly power my intellectual growth. The first learning experience was ostensibly about learning certain types of dances but was really about other outcomes that were far more important.

My parents concluded that I (at the ripe young age of 13) really needed to learn social graces and to increase my comfort levels with girls. So, they enrolled me in Mrs. Rankin's Ballroom Dancing School. This was a school-year long series of lessons on Friday evenings held in a nearby major city, a 15-mile bus ride from my suburban home. My parents let me take the public bus into the city alone and to return home via the same means. Today, most upper-class children would never be allowed by their helicopter parents to use such public transportation. These classes for elite upper-class kids like me were held at an elite location too, a ballroom complete with true chandeliers, in the Royal Connaught Hotel in Hamilton, Ontario. I had to wear my Sunday best, and to arrive each Friday night on time. The first thing I did each evening was to complete "the dance card." This was my first introduction to the teaching of expected gender roles, namely, for seven of the eight dances on the card, the boys were required to request the girls for the privilege of that dance. In turn the girls got to select a boy for only one of the eight dances. My greatest relief over this 2-year experience was that girls actually did pick me for that dance and actually seemed to want to do this! There was even a ritual to the selection process: The girls were seated in a circle awaiting the boys to approach them. When we did approach, we were expected to bow and then make our verbal request. We were also required to wear white gloves to absorb the assumed adolescent perspiration! What did I learn from this experience? Yes, how to talk to girls and become more comfortable doing so, but more importantly, I obtained an additional introduction to the upper strata of Canadian society and useful social interaction skills. Had I become an adult in Canada I am confident this would have supported my networking in that social circle and given me the social capital I would have needed to be successful in that subculture. Of course, I didn't know it then, but I was acquiring privilege for potential upward social mobility, exactly what I would observe years later that many of my college students lacked, through no fault of their own.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

My Beginnings: The Luck of the Draw

Question: So, what was your "luck of the draw?"

Discussion: We all have an origin story—one that does or does not suggest a likely probability that we would end up working in a college or university or being concerned about equity. What is your story?

An Educational Foundation: Grade 1 and Self-Discovery of Strengths Is a Cumulative Process: Grades 2 and 3

Questions: What kind of messages did you receive about yourself as a learner during this period?

Did you learn anything about effective—or ineffective—teaching that translates to the higher education setting?

Did you develop and discover any strengths of habit and character that were affirmed and now characterize you in adulthood?

Are there any parallels between how to help students start “school” effectively and how we launch our students as they enter higher education?

The Power of Early Multicultural Experiences: Grades 4 Through 8 in Canada

Question: Did you have any experiences in elementary/middle school that you could say now were multicultural even though you may not have had schooling outside the United States?

Were you acquiring the kind of social capital needed for success in college, and if so, how did this come about? If not, how did you eventually acquire whatever amount of social capital you now possess?

What have you found to be some of your students’ early school learning experiences and how might those experiences influence their approach to learning now?

Discuss: Do you find any parallels in my experiences in elementary and middle school compared to your own?

Reactions: What are your reactions to reading this section? Are there any insights or something you might want to consider further?

Decisions: Is there anything you thought about while reading this chapter that has led you to make a decision?