I enrolled in a selective private university in New England, encouraged by a high school guidance counselor who saw potential in all of her students, especially me. Even though I had graduated from a rural, underfunded public high school, I was confident in my academic abilities. But during freshman move-in day, I immediately recognized that, in crossing the geographic distance from North Carolina to New England, I had entered a foreign land that I didn’t understand and would have trouble navigating.

I made conscious efforts to hide my past and lack of resources from classmates and professors so that I would not be revealed as a fraud. I felt I needed to get rid of my southern accent for people to take me seriously. I hesitated to speak up in class because I did not want to embarrass myself by seeming ignorant or inarticulate. Between long hours of summer work to pay for the next year’s tuition, I read voraciously to try to catch up with classmates who had been prepared for college in so many ways that I had not. Even something as seemingly simple as pizza night in the dorm filled me with anxiety, because I could not afford even my small share.

I thought I did an extraordinary job of hiding my background—until my senior year, when an administrative assistant at the university office where I worked took me aside and gave me a few sweaters to keep warm during the winter. She was from a working-class family, and she easily saw through my façade. I felt simultaneously comforted and exposed.

Having grown up living paycheck to paycheck, I knew I needed a job, and I had set aside grander aspirations. My mentors and peers, on the other hand, were unaware of my class background and assumed that I would pursue a professional degree, which spurred me to think more about what my career plan could look like. A Ph.D. program offered both the prospect of financial stability and the luxury of engaging in ideas, so my academic journey continued.

While in grad school, I continued to conceal my background. I thought that the objectivity of science would shield me from classist attitudes, but I was wrong. Simply being in academia, where most colleagues came from middle- or upper-class backgrounds, meant that I regularly heard offensive comments, such as assertions that there are no poor people in New England and questions about the intellectual abilities of people with rural accents and worldviews. These statements, adding to years of veiled affronts, were disheartening, but my passion for science, my intellectual curiosity, and the prospect of attaining job security as a tenured professor kept me focused and driven.

Now, I regret not having spoken out more about my working-class background. Over the last few years, I have become determined to do what I can to bring the issues of social class in the university out of the dark. I encourage colleagues and administrators to develop initiatives to support students from working-class backgrounds, and those who are the first in their family to go to college. One approach is to harness the experiences of faculty and staff members who come from similar backgrounds themselves. Even simple acts, such as adding social class to inclusivity and diversity statements, can be powerful. And I encourage first-generation and working-class students to be proud of their roots and, especially, to pursue their dreams.
Coping with class in science
Curtis D. Holder (February 9, 2017)

Editor's Summary

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