



**STEVIE CALDWELL**, Wesleyan University, class of '99

WHEN YOUR PARENTS DIDN'T GO TO **COLLEGE**



**MARYELLEN GORDON**, Fordham University, class of '83

IN TODAY'S KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY, EDUCATION BEYOND HIGH SCHOOL IS ESSENTIAL—BUT IT'S ALSO REALLY HARD FOR KIDS WITH NO FAMILY PATH TO FOLLOW AND NO ONE TO EASE THE WAY. HERE, THE STORIES OF SMART, ACCOMPLISHED WOMEN WHO ONCE FACED THOSE OBSTACLES. AND IDEAS ON HOW YOU CAN **HELP THE NEXT GENERATION**

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asha Kornegay, now 42, first started hearing about higher education when she was not much bigger than her backpack. “My mother told me, ‘You have to make good grades. You have to get into college,’” she says. Her mother, who was just 16 when Kornegay was born, never finished high school. “She realized she should have gone, that education was pretty much the only way out of our situation,” says Kornegay, who grew up in a housing project in Durham, North Carolina. Her mother worked for a dry cleaner, earning minimum wage—which at the time was less than \$4 an hour—and her family

## THE FIRST LADY’S REACH HIGHER INITIATIVE

A first-generation college student herself, Michelle Obama understands the pitfalls of trying to go beyond where one’s parents have gone before. “She knew when she got to Princeton that based on where she started, she was just going to have to work really hard . . . and out-hustle everyone to be successful,” says Eric Waldo, executive director of the First Lady’s **Reach Higher** initiative, which focuses on postsecondary attainment for everyone.

FLOTUS emphasizes the importance of education when she talks to students, and discusses the academic preparation kids need to succeed on campus. **Reach Higher** has partnered with the College Board on the All-In program to get more students into Advanced Placement classes and works with the National Summer Learning Association to help students keep up their college-prep momentum during the summer break.

The First Lady wants all students to know that financial aid can help them afford a degree. Last year **Reach Higher** partnered with Get Schooled and MTV to broadcast a town hall

meeting on the topic. This year she challenged high schools to get more students to fill out the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid), and she asked colleges to offer immersion experiences to prospective students. She also applauds communities that put the spotlight on college attendance with events like College Signing Day or Wear-Your-College-Gear Day.

Finally, Mrs. Obama is an outspoken supporter of school counselors. At last summer’s annual conference of the American School Counselor Association, she told the crowd, “While we talk a great deal about the role of teachers and principals and parents in preparing kids for higher education, often engaged school counselors like all of you are the deciding factor in whether young people attend college or not.” She’d love to increase counselors’ training and decrease their caseloads. To draw attention to their usually behind-the-scenes work, for the first time ever, she held the School Counselor of the Year ceremony at the White House this year. “You can think about **Reach Higher** as sort of the First Lady as school-counselor-in-chief for the country,” says Waldo. (To learn more, visit [whitehouse.gov/reach-higher](http://whitehouse.gov/reach-higher).) —R.W.

sometimes ran out of food before the next paycheck arrived. “My mom said, ‘You have to go to school, because look at me.’”

The daunting rise in college costs is well documented. They’ve tripled in the past 35 years, while wages have barely budged. But behind these scary numbers hides an inescapable fact: People with bachelor’s degrees earn almost twice as much as their high school-only counterparts—nearly a million dollars more over a lifetime. And money is not the only benefit of a diploma. Studies show that people with more education enjoy healthier, happier and even longer lives.

Labor-market experts predict that by 2020, 65 percent of all jobs will require some form of postsecondary education (compared with 28 percent in the 1970s). But the young people least likely to get a BA

or BS are those whose parents, like Kornegay’s mom, never made it past high school themselves. And the vicious circle continues: They can land only low-wage jobs; their incomes keep them in poverty; and their own children are less likely to reach for higher education, even though they may be fully capable of attaining the most prestigious degrees. Kornegay has a bachelor’s, a master’s and a PhD. She works as a mental health therapist in private practice in Apex, North Carolina.

Those of us lucky enough to follow our parents on the path to a college degree will never understand just how challenging the process can be for the uninitiated. The advantages go beyond what extra household income can buy; baked-in “college knowledge” goes a long way. Parents in the know nudge their kids into AP classes and make them study for the SATs. They take them on college visits and help them craft the perfect essay. Meanwhile, first-generation students mostly fend for themselves. Below, some now-successful women talk about what their struggle was *really* like. Once you’ve heard their stories, you may find yourself wanting to reach out and help this year’s crop of first-gen college hopefuls. (For ideas, see “How You Can Have More Impact,” page 102.)

## “THE WORD

*college* was never said in my house when I was growing up. That was like talking about going to the moon,” says Susan Avery, a 55-year-old New Yorker who, after a successful career in journalism, now counsels students in a public high school about their college options. “My family was poor and not college educated, so what was encouraged



**TASHA KORNEGAY**, University of North Carolina, Charlotte, class of '96. MA, North Carolina Central University; PhD, Walden University

was to get a job as soon as you could. I worked all through high school.” Her parents had civil service jobs, and they wanted Avery to become a secretary, like her mother. As a result, “I rarely did homework,” she says, and graduated near the bottom of her high school class. “Every single friend of mine went to college, but I truly thought, I’m not college material. I didn’t feel bad about it. It wasn’t my path; it was their path.”

Many children of today’s less educated workers face the same problem. At home, terms like *professor*, *major* and *student loans* are never mentioned and may as well not exist. Melissa Mesku, 33, grew up in a small California town; her mother was a purchaser for the school district, her father a dental technician. Mesku never thought about college until her friends began showing up at school

with acceptance letters. “I thought, Oh shit! When did that happen?” she says. Not exactly an underachiever—she was the editor of her high school newspaper—Mesku says she “didn’t know anyone who had been to college, had never heard anyone talk about college, so college simply never occurred to me.”

Even if a first-generation student does see herself as academically qualified for college, misunderstandings about financial aid may cause her to write herself off. “At the school where I’m a counselor, one kid’s mom is a housekeeper who earns around \$16,000 a year,” recounts Avery. “She said, ‘My mom said I’m not going to get any financial aid because she earns a living.’ She was under the impression that you have to be jobless to get financial aid. I told her, ‘With all due respect to your mom, on that point she is 100 percent wrong.’” >>



MELISSA MESKU, University of California, Berkeley, class of '03

“Just as girls once learned very quickly that science wasn’t for them, first-generation students can learn that college is not for them, if we’re not careful,” says former urban-school counselor Mandy Savitz-Romer, now a senior lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, where she specializes in counseling and college planning. Right now, she says, “some kids have already given up on the college idea by ninth grade.” Which is why those who work in schools—administrators, teachers and counselors—play such a crucial role for first-generation students who aren’t hearing about college at home. “This work starts in middle school,” says Savitz-Romer. “School counselors can start talking to kids about college, what jobs require college, even just helping them figure out what they’re good at and what their passions are. What kind of place do they want to make for themselves in this world? That can start very early.”

## THE ROLE

of school counselors (the modern term for the outdated *guidance counselor*) intensifies in high school, where they can make or break students’ college dreams. “I still remember how one of my high school counselors told me that I shouldn’t apply to Princeton,” said First Lady Michelle Obama, 51 (a first-gen herself, along with her older brother), in a speech at Booker T. Washington High School in Atlanta last September. “[She] told me I would never make it there, that I was setting my sights too high. Can you believe that? She told me, ‘Don’t bother.’”

Stevie Caldwell, 38, had more encouragement at her high school. “I was lucky enough to have a good counselor to talk to about the process, including how to apply for financial aid and scholarships and fill out the necessary forms,” says Caldwell, whose single mother had struggled

to feed her four children and keep the utilities on when Caldwell was growing up in Cleveland. “I knew I didn’t want to live like that, and I got the idea that college was a surefire way not to.” Her counselor and her English teacher, who oversaw her academic progress and proofread her college-application essays, cheered her on. Caldwell graduated from Wesleyan University, in Middletown, Connecticut, where she studied photography and sang in an a cappella group. She now works as a development-operations engineer in Boston. “I didn’t get a degree in the field that became my career, but college was still valuable—it exposed me to the world and taught me how to think,” she says. “I also met my wife there. That’s huge.”

Many students who need their school counselor’s help will have to wait a very long time. “In some states, they have caseloads of 700 to 800 students,” says Savitz-Romer. In fact, in California, the state with the highest student-to-counselor ratio, there are 1,000 students for every counselor. The caseload should be 250, according to the American School Counselor Association. Most counselors spend only part of their time talking to students about college, because they are also dealing with social issues such as bullying or emotional stumbling blocks such as grief and eating disorders.

“Counseling or advising is essential,” says Dewayne Matthews, vice president of strategy development at the Lumina Foundation, which focuses on increasing the number of Americans with high-quality post-secondary credentials. A study by the College Board found that adding one counselor to a school would increase the number of students attending a four-year college by 10 percent. “This is an inconvenient truth,” says Matthews. “No one knows how to deal with the need on the scale that we need it.”

Some parents of first-generation students do dive in to try to help their kids navigate the college process. “I remember sitting with my mother at our long dining room table, with all the financial-aid papers, and being on the brink of being overwhelmed many times,” says Maryellen Gordon, 53, a brand consultant in Brooklyn whose father had emigrated from Ireland. “But my mother and father were both so encouraging and supportive, I knew I couldn’t give up. And my mother was very financially savvy and organized, so the two of us were able to work through everything together.”

These days the Internet makes information much more accessible. A good place for prospective students to start their research is the College Board website ([collegeboard.org](http://collegeboard.org)), where they can create a profile with their preferences and make a list of schools they might want to attend. The site also provides information about such tests as the SAT, college-application deadlines and financial-aid forms (see page 44 for a

list of other helpful websites and apps). “Online is good, but sometimes you really want the one-on-one advice and attention and explanation,” says Rachel Fishman, an education policy analyst at the New America Foundation. Community organizations may provide such help through programs at local libraries, YMCAs and student centers. “In Boston the YMCA sponsors College Goal Sunday, which is a whole day dedicated to helping students fill out the FAFSA,” she says, referring to the Free Application for Federal Student Aid. »

## FAMOUS FIRST-GENS

### Prominent women share their college struggles

Acclaimed author **Mary Gordon** knew that she was college-bound but also that she needed to stay close to her family’s home in Valley Stream, New York. “I couldn’t leave town because my mother was physically handicapped, so I somehow figured out that the best school in New York was Barnard,” says Gordon, now 65 and a professor of English at her alma mater. “I wrote to them, got a catalog and did everything myself.” But her conservative Catholic high school disliked the college she had chosen. “The principal refused to send my transcripts to Barnard because it was non-Catholic. I was just so ferocious at the time that I called Barnard and said, ‘You have to tell them they can’t do that.’ They did, and I got in.”

But when she arrived at the Barnard campus, Gordon faced the kinds of obstacles today’s first-generation kids still encounter. “I remember one young woman who had a lot of money saying, ‘Oh, I’m having trouble with this paper; I think I’ll go buy a new pair of boots,’ she recalls. “I was like, ‘I have one pair of boots, and they will last me for all of college.’ I was very much aware that they had a kind of entitlement that I didn’t have.”

“College is fundamentally a middle-class milieu,” says **Ruth Simmons**, 70, who became the first black president of an Ivy League school, Brown University, in 2001. She went to Dillard University, in New Orleans, from her home deep in the inner city, wearing

clothes her high school teachers had pulled from their closets. During visits to her parents, she says, she “didn’t want people to think I was different because I went to college. Yes, I was taking a course on existentialism, which was having a profound effect on how I was seeing my life, but I knew not to talk about it. I didn’t talk about fancy things. I didn’t talk about the real experience I was having in college, because it separated me from people at home. It can be a little bit of a lonely experience for first-generation students because of that.”

**Donna Brazile**, 55, the political powerhouse who serves as vice chair of the Democratic National Committee, started saving up early to fund her college education. “I had four little businesses,” she says—landscaping, recycling, bait-and-tackle and elder assistance. Those earnings, along with grants, scholarships and part-time work, allowed her to graduate with less than \$2,000 in debt. “The cost of college has gone up 300 percent, and I worry about that,” she says. “Plus, kids find their way through college for a job that doesn’t exist anymore.” Her advice to today’s students is to study something they love. “If you have to borrow for it,” she says, “think of it as an investment in yourself and in your future.”

“You have to see beyond the momentary discomfort of not having the same clothes as the other students, of not being able to go on a ski trip to Switzerland on spring break, to the tremendous opportunity you have to move your life ahead,” says Simmons. “Focus on what’s important and excel.” In the end, she notes, the education itself will help you catch up. —R.W.

Mentors, teachers, coaches and volunteers can help fill the college-knowledge gap for first-generation students. “I got lucky,” says Mesku. “My boyfriend’s mother worked at a community college, and she took me under her wing. She suggested some classes and helped me find rewarding work on campus.” After two successful years there, “taking a little bit of everything,” Mesku moved on to the University of California, Berkeley, where she got a degree in rhetoric. She has since launched two businesses, one selling dental technology, the other in publishing.

“It ultimately boils down to millions of one-on-one relationships” between students and mentors, says Matthews. “Every one of them is valuable, and people should be looking for opportunities to do this, through their church, through community organizations, maybe

through a state program like Tennessee Promise.” Because for all the information that’s available online, sometimes a student still needs someone she can call with what feels like a dumb question, such as, “What should I eat the morning of the SATs?” or “What’s this ‘adjusted gross income’ number that the FAFSA wants?”

## WE ALL

know that college has become very expensive, but unless you’ve put a kid through school recently, you may not fully grasp just how much costs have skyrocketed. “It’s invariably shocking to people when they sit down and look at how much tuition their alma mater actually charges and ask themselves how would they pay for that,” says Matthews.

I tried it. Total cost (including room, board and fees) for a year at Georgetown University in 1993, when I was a student there: about \$23,000 (\$37,360 in today’s dollars). Cost now: \$67,000—and \$48,000 is for tuition alone. (I borrowed money, and any future child of mine would need to do so as well. It took me about 12 years to pay off my loans.)

“Students are really feeling the squeeze like never before,” says Fishman. “You can’t work your way through college these days. Just multiply out minimum wage and compare it with the cost of attending a public institution.”

Let’s see: One year working full time at the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour—that’s \$15,080. (And a full-time job doesn’t leave much room for studying.) Median cost of a year at a four-year public institution: \$18,943.

Even if a student gets financial aid, the financial challenges don’t stop. “I had no cash,” says Kornegay of her arrival at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte, in 1991. “I didn’t think I needed it. I had food and shelter. I just wanted to concentrate on my schoolwork.” But after two weeks on campus, when she’d run through her supply of clean clothing, “I went down to the laundry room, and I saw, oh, you have to put quarters in! I called my mom and told her, ‘You have to have money to wash clothes.’ She said, ‘That doesn’t make any sense. Where are you supposed to get that money?’ She said, ‘You can do what I do when I don’t have soap powder. Wash your undies in the sink.’ I did that secretly, so my roommates wouldn’t know, until I got a job.”

And for Kornegay, the cost of laundry was the least of it. She also needed books for her classes—which cost hundreds of dollars each semester—a parking pass and more meals than her plan allotted. “My best friend always had excess money on her meal card, and she would just hand it over to me,” she recalls. But some things Kornegay had to skip altogether. “There were a lot of

## HOW YOU CAN HAVE MORE IMPACT

**YOU’RE PROBABLY** lucky enough to have something you could share—math or writing skills, a bit of money, some free Saturday afternoons. Would-be students could benefit from any of these.

**Go to the Lumina Foundation’s MoveED map to find programs in your community that help aspiring college students.** See how you might volunteer your skills. For example, if you’re a CPA or just have a knack for numbers, you could help students fill out their FAFSA forms ([moveed.org/partner/lumina/](http://moveed.org/partner/lumina/)).

**Become a mentor.** Share your college knowledge with a first-generation applicant, whether it’s your neighbor, your niece or a kid from the high school down the street. Mentoring can be a time commitment, but it can make a huge difference. “Think about showing a student what it’s like to be a working professional and what opportunities are open to them,” suggests Rachel Fishman, an education policy analyst at the New America Foundation.

**Establish an emergency grant at a local college.** “People like to set up scholarships for bright young people who are probably going to college anyway, but providing a \$300 loan for someone whose car broke down can make all the difference,” says Dewayne Matthews, vice president of strategy development at the Lumina Foundation. Alternatively, read the requests on sites like GoFundMe (check the education section) to help a student with a specific need.

**Call a local school district, or the principal’s office of a high school, in an underserved part of town.** Offer to donate your time, perhaps editing essays or doing SAT prep.

**Organize a career fair by calling a handful of friends in different occupations.** Have them gather at a community center at 10 AM on a Saturday to talk to high school kids about their professions.

**Encourage your alma mater to recruit more first-generation and low-income students.** “Let’s be candid: That might hurt the college in the rankings,” says Matthews. Help the school make this transition. “Too often alums are advocates for traditions and keeping things the way they were,” he says. “That needs to change.” —R.W.



**LAURA MOROWITZ**, Brooklyn College, class of '87. MA and PhD, Institute of Fine Arts, New York University

organizations I thought I could have excelled in, but there were fees," she says. "I wanted to join the AKAs, a sorority. They came to me and said, 'We're going to have a rush, and we think you'd be great.' But after I realized there were membership dues and fees, I had to tell them, 'I would love to join your group, but I can't afford it.'"

**SOMETIMES** the most critical months for these students are before they've even set foot on campus. "There's a phenomenon called summer melt," says Fishman. "Students go through everything to get into college, and then they don't show up in the fall." It accounts for the loss of 10 to 20 percent of a class. Yet simple

interventions can ward off problems like this. A study published last October by Harvard University Press found that sending low-income students text reminders about upcoming college deadlines (with links to a live counselor) boosted attendance from 63 to 70 percent.

Students often disappear because they've made a mistake they think is significant but really isn't. They miss a deadline and think, "I forgot to send in my deposit; I guess I'm not going to college anymore." Or they don't sign up for a dorm room, and say, "Oh my God, I have no housing. I can't go." What they don't tell themselves, says Fishman, is "I can contact somebody and advocate for myself.' If someone has gone to college before you, they explain how to work the system."

For those who do make it to campus, the real work begins. Getting through college isn't easy, even for kids who **CONTINUED ON PAGE 140**



## MERYL STREEP AND MICHELLE OBAMA

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 85 dropping names!

**MO:** And [I'll bet he] was cute when he said it!

**MS:** He told me when he was a little bitty boy living in the part of working-class England where they built ships, Queen Elizabeth came to town for the Queen's jubilee. He had been excited for weeks about her visit; his family had a picture of the Queen in their house. He stood with his mum in the crowd, and as the Queen passed by in an open car doing the royal wave, she stopped waving for an instant and looked directly into his eyes. He said it was at that moment that he thought, Someday I want to be in a car like that . . .

**MO:** I don't want to be standing out here.

**MS:** It's interesting, that a little encounter like that could have such a big impact.

My legacy, I feel, is written by other people. Somehow it trails after me like tin cans tied to the back of a car—that all my award nominations and things like that are me. But when I think about what I really want to leave behind, I realize it's what my mother left me. For the people that I touched and cared about, I want it to matter to them that I was in their lives. I want my love for them to sustain them after I'm gone. I draw strength from my mother; I want them to draw strength from me. My legacy is personal to me. The bigger part of it—the Meryl Streep of it all—I kind of can't handle that.

**MO:** Meryl is too much for you?

**MS:** Yeah, it's too much. It's too much.

**MO:** Your mom could have handled it!

### **If you're not First Lady or a movie star, what's one thing a woman can do to have more impact in the world?**

**MS:** Be a mindful shopper. Think about the impact your purchases make: Is what I buy good for the environment? Where is it made? How are the people who are making it treated? Those things make a difference.

**MO:** Be passionate about something and lean to that strength. I think that's what I've done. And I see that in women like Meryl. As Meryl says, it's those little conversations that you have with your kids, it's the small gestures, that can make the greatest impact. What you do in your family and in your community is as powerful as what Meryl does on the screen and what I do around the world. It's like my kids say: "You do you." That's where great things can happen. ©

## FIRST GENERATION TO COLLEGE

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 103 aren't the first in their family to go. "Suddenly I was in classes with prep school kids who were describing themselves as existentialists or Nietzscheans or discussing the merits of reading *Beowulf* in Old English," says Gordon, who attended Fordham University in the Bronx. "I had no clue what they were talking about." She was saved by the confidence she'd earned from being considered a smart kid in every public school she'd attended. "I didn't back down. I read, I talked to friends, I joined the staff of the student newspaper and began to figure out some of this stuff."

Today's first-generation students often come out of underperforming school districts, which may leave them struggling with basics such as reading, writing and math. "I'll have a lot of students come up to me when they're taking a multiple-choice exam and say, 'What does this word mean: *plethora*?' Their vocabulary just isn't as built up," says John Newbold, an associate professor of management and marketing at Sam Houston State University in Texas, a regional school where more than 60 percent of the students are first generation. He has conducted studies on their motivation, satisfaction, specific challenges and academic success. "I'm still shocked when I see the number of students who take six years to graduate," Newbold says.

The common-core standards, a set of learning goals in literacy and math published in 2010, aim to help all students in the U.S. become college ready so that fewer will face what Avery did when she decided to enroll in community college in the hope of becoming a medical assistant. "I had to take remedial this, remedial that, even a class on how to study. No one had ever taught me that," she says.

Obstacles encountered after arrival often stretch beyond the academic. "There was no

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one to guide me that first year,” says Susan Beringer, 56, a nurse practitioner in New Hampshire. “I had *no* idea that orientation was an overnight—I showed up without my things and had to go home and get them. I had no idea how to procure financial aid. No one told me I wouldn’t need *every* book listed in the syllabus!” Beringer worked her way through school, often rising at 4:45 in the morning after studying until 1 AM.

“What we hear most from kids is conveyed in the phrase ‘Life happens,’” says Kim Cook, executive director of the National College Access Network, a nonprofit that provides support and advocacy for organizations working with underserved students. “‘My car broke down, so I can’t get to campus and I don’t have the wiggle room in my budget to buy a new car or pay for an expensive repair.’ Or ‘I have a job and my employer changed my hours, so I can no longer attend that Wednesday class.’” Or something happens at home, often involving child care, or when a family member loses a job or gets sick.

These students frequently help support their parents, siblings or extended family, and being at college, where life is comparatively easy, can make them feel guilty that their loved ones are still suffering back home. Kornegay won some scholarships, which led to refund checks from her school that she could have put toward discretionary expenses such as those sorority fees. Instead, she sent the money home to her mother and sister. “Sometimes they wouldn’t have food. I needed to help them out,” she explains. And Mesku landed a work-study job paying \$11.15 an hour, far more than she could have earned from an off-campus job. “I was using that money to help my parents pay their mortgage, until they couldn’t anymore,” she says. (The family eventually lost its home to foreclosure.)

In families with college experience and more resources, of course, parents or siblings can provide the emergency money, advice or encouragement the student needs, rather than the other way around. This is where other role models—you, perhaps?—come into play. Mentors or peers can take over that role, helping overburdened students navigate the campus system.

First-gen students may have it rougher than their peers, but that can also spur them to try harder. “What I found jarring was how little some students actually

valued being in college,” says Maria Gonzalez, 47, who studied molecular and cell biology at UC Berkeley. “To them it was just a given and their chance to act like idiots.” Now a senior partner at a San Francisco ad agency, Gonzalez, whose parents emigrated from Mexico, gravitated toward less entitled, more focused classmates. “I tended to connect more with first-generation types, immigrants and others in academically rigorous majors,” she says.

Laura Morowitz, a 48-year-old art-history professor at Wagner College, on Staten Island, New York, who earned her PhD at New York University, says college was a true intellectual awakening for her. “Clearly my professors loved what they did, and they were really alive,” she says. “I realized you could model a life for yourself doing something you love and being part of a bigger, ambitious community of thinkers.”

Morowitz had attributed her early, undergrad successes to the caliber of the school she attended, which she felt was not as rigorous or demanding as other institutions. “Once I began graduate school, I realized that was not the reason I’d succeeded,” she says. “I was just as good as—or better than—students who came from ‘better’ schools. It’s a realization that has been reinforced for me many times in my experience as a professor: There are brilliant students who come from very well educated parents, and brilliant students who’ve grown up with very little. Some of my best students have been those who are first generation.” ☺

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