

The cost of success

By Steve Desroches '96

When I told my grandmother I was moving to Provincetown, at the tip of Cape Cod, she gave me a strange look.

“Don’t you have to start paying your student loans soon,” she asked. “The Cape’s for rich people. I don’t know if this is such a good idea.”

She had cause for concern. Over the past five years, Cape Cod has become so expensive that young people and families are leaving the region in a mass exodus. The effects of the runaway real estate market are so severe that many schools on the Outer Cape have seen a 25 percent decline in student enrollment over the past several years. But anyone who lives here knows Cape Cod is anything but wealthy, except for those few months when the summer people return. The towns on the Cape are working hard

to keep the peninsula from becoming nothing more than a gated community. The gradual loss of the working and middle classes has already had a severe negative impact on the local communities, the region’s economy and the general character of Cape Cod. This is what happens when there is little economic diversity.

My grandmother’s worries over my move to Cape Cod reminded me of a comment my late grandfather made on my graduation day from Wheaton. For a brief time, just after World War II, my grandparents owned a tiny fishing shack on the Norton Reservoir where they spent many a day together. On the trip home to Taunton, they usually made a drive past Wheaton’s campus.

“We used to say to each other, ‘That’s where all the rich girls go to school,’” my grandfather told me with tears welling in his eyes. “I never thought that anyone in my family would ever be graduating from here.”

My grandparents, poor children of Polish immigrants, were probably right. There was a time when many “rich girls” attended Wheaton. But that has changed; today students from every economic background enjoy a Wheaton education, but often at a price. With



the hard work of my family and the financial aid we received from Wheaton, my sister and I were able to graduate debt-free. Many others do not. If I was a senior in high school today, I doubt that Wheaton—at more than \$40,000 a year—would be a possibility for me financially. I suspect this is true for many of my classmates.

When I received my master’s degree from the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University, I learned just how oppressive student loan debt can be after graduation. However, Columbia’s j-school is taking steps to reduce the burdens of future students. Under significant pressure from the alumnae/i and professors, the school now dedicates 100 percent of its Annual Fund for student scholarships. I know Wheaton is a very different institution with a very different

mission. And I know that as an institution, Wheaton is aware of the high cost of higher education and works with sincerity to keep tuition increases to a minimum and the debt load of its graduates as low as possible. It is also clear that college affordability is a national crisis and much larger than just one college or university.

Reducing student debt at Wheaton must be one of the college’s most important priorities. Doing so will ensure that the college can continue to attract the best, brightest, most creative and innovative students—the kind of students that a phenomenal institution like Wheaton deserves, regardless of their economic background. This must be an institutional priority. That is why from now on, when I give to the Annual Fund, I designate my gift to go toward student scholarships.

I am so proud of my alma mater and all the progress the “Wheaton family” has made. But I will be most proud to see the day when no accepted student decides not to attend Wheaton because they can’t afford it or they are afraid to face a crippling financial debt upon graduation. 📍

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