

Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador

My MUN Experience

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I was born and raised in Conception Bay South (CBS) and graduated from Holy Spirit High School in 1995. During my high school years I witnessed the end of the denominational school system. At this time, students required a 70 % average in the 3000 level public exam courses. This was not a concern for me as I had a mid 80's score. Perhaps this was inflated somewhat as the year previous, public exams were cancelled. I had always done well in school but I really had no study skills. I was engaged in class and disciplined enough to pay attention and complete all assignments on time. I would categorize myself as a classic underachiever back then. I didn't have any desire to attend a post secondary institute but I assumed that I would as directed by my parents and that's just what everyone seemed to do. My father had been an educator and an administrator and my older brother was attending Memorial University, doing well. My mother continually reminded me that I had to get a degree. I recall having completed my last high school exam and I was looking forward to the chance to sleep in. My mother woke me up on the day after my last exam and suggested that I go in and write the optional electoral district scholarship exam. After much groaning and a glass of orange juice, I found myself at school, bed head and all, writing the exam. I managed to win an entry scholarship valued at \$1000 which nearly covered my first semester tuition at MUN. I credit my high score on the science and religion sections of the exam. I thought this was hilarious at the time as I did not see myself as an academic.

My first term at MUN was tumultuous. Nobody was going to help me unless I sought out the help. Student orientation was helpful but very strange for me. I knew many people attending and they all seemed very serious about getting started on their respective educational paths. I found the Breezeway and the video games arcade most appealing. This is where I spent my down time. Either I was pumping quarters into Samauri Showdown or downing cheap draft beer. Many would see this as wasted time but I made several friends that I am still close with. I lived at home with my parents, older brother and younger sister. We commuted back and forth to university from CBS. We would arrive in the early morning and often stayed at MUN long hours as our combined schedules were quite complicated. I am amazed at the sacrifices my parents made to ensure that we all made it to school and work. I was on track to complete a Bachelor of Science. My first term I was enrolled in introductory Biology, Physics, English, Math and a Religious Studies course. The only two courses I was really interested in were Biology and Religion.

On my very first day of class, I entered my religious studies classroom. Once the professor began it was apparent that I had no idea what he was talking about. Then I read the course outline title and realized that I was in a 4th level Classics course. I had thought that

everyone else looked very mature. I said nothing in hopes that I could just wait it out until the end and leave, never to return, unnoticed. About midway through the class the professor must have noticed my vacant but frightened stare and asked if I were in the right class. I said “No.” which was met with much laughter by the class. He then inquired as to why I would sit there and do nothing about it. I did not have an answer and I left the room quickly. I have never been in a Classics course since. Looking back, my one day Classics professor's question held a lot of truth. I spent a lot of time not doing much about anything. I achieved B's and C's that first term, which was impressive considering how little time I spent on school work. I crammed when I needed and this was my normal routine for test preparation. The following term I completed the second round of introductory courses with similar results.

I started working as a lifeguard and swimming instructor. This is where I began learning how to teach. I had a knack for entertaining young kids and I did well as a teacher. I avoided my studies as much as possible during my second year at MUN. My marks suffered greatly. I had switched my program of study to primary/elementary education. I skipped many classes, missed many assignment deadlines and found myself on academic probation after my first term and subsequently failed out of MUN. I was upset but relieved as I thought that this would be the end of school for me. Under pressure from family and friends, I appealed my dismissal from MUN and was granted a second chance by ‘the powers that be’. I ultimately felt humiliated and unworthy. I began dedicating myself to my job and gained a promotion to management. This is where I really learned how to work hard. I took pride in my work and really tried to do my best and I was rewarded for it. At the beginning of my third year at MUN, I moved out of my parents’ house and into an apartment with my girlfriend. Despite the unhealthy relationship I was in, life was good. I made enough money to provide for myself and I returned to MUN part-time. I still was a poor achiever. But this time, I was trying. My employment took priority and I studied as much as I could. Working full time and going to school was difficult. I returned to the Bachelors of Science program and was determined to finish. I recall long hours of getting help with chemistry at the help center. I also had a lot of positive support from friends who were now nearing the end of their bachelor’s program. I found being relatively behind was humbling. I knew I had to work hard to be successful at school. I still struggled and I gave up on a few courses along the way.

Finally, I swallowed my pride and asked my parents if I could move back home to finish my Science degree. The unhealthy relationship I was in had ended and I had quit my job in management. At the time I remember feeling quite defeated despite my best efforts to maintain my lifestyle. My folks were overjoyed at my decision to return home. I worked jobs at a grocery store and as a home care support worker to pay off debt that I had accrued while living on my own. A job became available with the local swim team and I began teaching swimming again which rekindled my desire to be a teacher. The swim team became a family to me. I always felt that I had to do my best in school as I demanded the same from my swimmers. I had never been so devoted to anything before. Our team grew and performed well on a National

level. We won many team awards for being the most spirited and I credit the amazing kids and families that I was fortunate enough to work with. I won a coaching excellence award that gave me the necessary validation I needed to stay focused on my goals. I enjoyed the science and religious studies courses as they both presented vastly different student experiences. I also attended the marine biology field station at GrosMourne for 5 summer courses. Hands on field studies and laboratory work were enjoyable and better suited to my learning style.

I had one last course to complete my Science degree, a biochemistry course about metabolism. I had a decent average going into the exam. I wrote the exam and felt good about it. The time came to phone in to receive my grade. At this point, I had been traumatized by that automated reporting system several times. I recall the eternity between the automated 'Biochemistry' and 'F'. This was impossible. I worked hard and thought I had done well. I'm pretty sure I freaked out completely at the automated lady on the phone. I had never wanted anything so bad in life. So close to the finish, yet so far away. My father insisted that I go to see the professor immediately to see my exam and find out what happened. He suggested that it may be a mistake. I resisted, but was desperate. I proceeded to go to MUN and speak with my professor who gave me my exam and the answer key. As I perused the carnage, I looked at the questions and noticed that I had entered the multiple choice answers on the answer key in a vertical sequence but the answer sheet was arranged numerically in a horizontal sequence. Then, I leapt up and screamed out. The professor made some calls and I was granted credit for the course. If it were not for the flexibility and understanding of this professor and the encouragement from my family, I would have not have graduated.

My younger sister had also just completed her Bachelor's degree and we both applied to the Faculty of Education Intermediate/Secondary program. The letters came, she was accepted. I was denied on the basis of my 'non-competitive average'. That being said, my average was a 76 % but the lowest average they accepted for Biology majors was an 81 %. I was devastated, not only at the rejection but I was looking forward to taking courses with my little sister. After all, I credit her with helping me through several difficult courses during my Science degree. Over my MUN career I have never been self motivated. I have always wanted to do well for others. My academic past has had many second chances. Many parents of the swimmers I coached heard about my rejection from the Faculty of Education. I came to learn that several emails had been sent to the Dean of Education on my behalf. I had written a formal appeal myself outlining the reasons why they should let me in to become a teacher. I was admitted to the program. This was a turning point for me. I was tired of needing second chances and I wanted to impress myself for the first time.

I moved out of my parents' house, again, but this time under much healthier circumstances. I availed of the student loan program to focus exclusively on school. My sister and I registered for all of the same courses during Education outside of our methodology courses. We were a great team with complementary strengths. She taught me how to be organized, focused and prepared. I offered quality presentation abilities and was not easily stressed. I had

honed my skills as a teacher through coaching and I found the material in the education courses very interesting and useful. The professors were skilled teachers themselves. I learned a tremendous amount from the manner in which they taught. Many taught classes with the methods in which they were teaching us to employ. My experience with the Education department at MUN has always been positive. The difference between professors who are trained as educators versus those who are subject matter experts is a stark one. This is the nature of educational studies and I enjoyed the entire Bachelor of Education program.

Upon graduation, I began coaching with a city swim team and the MUN varsity swim team and I applied for a job at an Independent Jesuit School. I taught Science and Theology for two years at this private school until I made the move to the public system. I was called in to substitute for grades 7,8 and 9 English Language Arts and Math for the first three days of school. The incumbent teacher did not return to the position for several months and I stayed on as the replacement. Once the teacher returned, a new position had become available at the school which I applied for and received. During my Education degree program I had been told by everyone that it was impossible to gain employment in the metro area if you are a new teacher starting out. I ignored their sentiments and thought that if I worked hard enough, was open to teach anything and contributed to the school community, it would work out. I volunteered at every opportunity, coached sports' teams and became involved in committee work. I always made myself available to assist students in any way that I could. I maintain these practices and I feel that they have served me well and brought much personal satisfaction.

Over the past 8 years of my teaching career, a lot has changed. I have gained permanent tenured status and I have had the fortune of making numerous positive relationships. I have taught Math, Gym, English, Health, Religion, Music, Careers, Industrial Arts and Science. All disciplines have helped diversify my repertoire of teaching methods. I have participated in facilitating professional development for colleagues, character education programs and leadership roles. I have also worked with the Department of Education on resource development, curriculum development and participated in documenting professional learning activities for teachers. Through a local publishing company, I have contributed in the development of teacher resource guides for Religious Education. I have focused on relationships with students and getting to know them well. Learning how they learn best by being genuinely interested in whatever they are interested in enhances my instruction.

Now, I am at the half-way point of the Master's Program in Educational Leadership at Memorial University. I enjoy the courses immensely as they offer a chance to learn valid and engaging ideas in education. The material we learn is very relevant to teaching and education. I appreciate hearing the multiple perspectives from other teachers. This knowledge is invaluable. Maintaining a teaching career and being a student is challenging but I generally do well because I enjoy the material and the process itself. I appreciate the collegiality of the Master's program and graduate studies in general. Now the challenge is to become a better researcher, academic writer and student overall. I think the goal of any graduate student is to attempt to generate new

knowledge and perspectives based on our teaching experiences and the material we are learning. I look forward to classes and completing school work which is very different than when I started out at MUN. To be honest, I never thought that MUN would be enjoyable. Once I began putting in a genuine effort, I experienced the benefits of being a student at Memorial. Finding subjects and teachers that I enjoyed is a key part of my successes to date. And who knows, perhaps I will continue on with Doctoral studies after the Master's program is complete.