

## **BEGINNING OF SEMESTER STATEMENT OF BELIEFS**

Rob Warren ~ SOC 3452

I grew up in Maryland. My mom lived on a horse farm in a rural area—a county that became a suburban area while I lived there until I was 18. My dad lived in Washington, D.C., but I only went there on the weekends. So, this is really a story about my life in Maryland.

My elementary school from kindergarten through 5<sup>th</sup> grade was in smaller public schools in Brandywine, MD. My memory is that the teachers were older—they had worked in the schools for a long time. Most were white, but some were African American. The students were about half white and half African American, mixed together in the same classes. Some of my best grade school friends were African American. My memory is that there were not any “ability groups” or “tracks”—kids were in classes together and worked together regardless of their reading level or their skill level in other subjects. But, I could have been wrong about that—maybe kids who were really different from me were in separate classes. I don’t remember having any difficulties through 5<sup>th</sup> grade—I never got in trouble, got mostly good grades (except that one music class in third grade where I got a C- and the teacher noted that I “talked and played in class”). However, I also don’t remember being a star student or anything like that.

To start 6<sup>th</sup> grade, my mom moved me to a different public school further south in Maryland and further away from Washington, D.C. This meant that the students were mainly white farm kids—many of whom were fairly poor—with a few wealthier suburban white kids. I don’t remember there being that many racial/ethnic minority kids in my classes in middle school (6<sup>th</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grades). It could be that the school was mostly white; it could be that I was in different classes than the racial/ethnic minority students. I don’t know. I do remember the grades were divided by numbers (e.g., 6-1, 6-2, 6-3) where the latter number indicated whether you were in the advanced/honors track, the general track, or the remedial track. Anyway, I really excelled in middle school—got good grades and so forth. I seem to remember the teachers using a lot of non-traditional classroom strategies where I could learn at my own pace; that really worked for me.

I went to one large public high school—again, in Southern Maryland—for all four years. By the time I was in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, the county was becoming more suburban. This meant that there were more wealthy neighborhoods and kids, most of them white. But it also meant there were more middle-class African Americans who were leaving Washington, D.C. and the closer-in suburbs. So, my high school had quite a mix of students in terms of race/ethnicity, economic circumstances, and farm/suburban/urban background. In high school, I pretty much only took “honors” or AP or similar courses. Even the 9<sup>th</sup> grade English and math courses had so-called ability levels—upper and lower. This meant that I generally didn’t have classes or social activities with kids who were very different from me. My high school teachers were OK, but what really engaged me were academically-oriented extracurricular activities. Debate team. Science fairs. Math team. Nerdy stuff like that. I ended up excelling in high school—I was the valedictorian.

I got no real guidance or help in thinking about college. I only had a handful of conversations with my parents—mostly enough to know that they'd help pay for it, which was a luxury I appreciated. I don't remember any conversations with school counselors or teachers; most of my classmates didn't go to college, and those who did generally went to the local community college or maybe the University of Maryland. But, because I did well on standardized tests and got good grades, I got lots of letters and catalogues in the mail from colleges. I have no idea how I picked the college I did—Carleton College in Northfield, MN. I only applied to three colleges, and gave almost no thought to how to decide where to apply. Carleton seemed good, so I enrolled. My parents paid for a lot of it (with loans), I knew I would do a ton of work-study, and I knew I'd probably work at some other job off campus.

Carleton is an elite liberal arts college where all the students are high-achieving, the classes are small, and all the instructors are very accomplished and generally very good classroom instructors. Pretty much everyone lives on campus, so you never really get away from school. Dorms had parties and fun, but they also lots of study groups and so on. I did OK academically at Carleton (mostly got B's) but I found a home in the Sociology/Anthropology department ... mainly because of a couple of very charismatic and skilled classroom teachers. They made the material exciting, related it well to real life. I never met with professors outside of class (most students did, I think) and I never participated in study groups or anything like that. I worked almost full time—in the cafeteria, delivering pizza, etc.—and that took a lot of my time.

Most people think carefully about where to attend graduate school. Not me! I followed a woman I was dating to Madison, WI and enrolled in their Sociology PhD program as an afterthought—as something to do. Turns out, it was (at the time) the top PhD program in the country. For the same reasons that I liked the debate team and science fairs and things in high school, I liked graduate school. And, I had one great faculty mentor (Robert M. Hauser) who gave me lots of fantastic opportunities, financial support, and advice. I worked closely with him, his wife, and the team of graduate students around him for all seven years of graduate school. Some of those people are still close friends. In part because I had such great support, I did very well in graduate school.

Looking back, I'd say that early in my education (through high school) I had about average schools and teachers and then later in my education (college and graduate school) I had exceptional teachers/mentors and schools. I was lucky enough to go to a top liberal arts college and a top graduate program. My guess is that I had more opportunities than most students throughout—from kindergarten through graduate school. Sometimes I can see how or why: Doing well in high school gave me college opportunities. Being at a top college gave me all sorts of opportunities (and I never would have been admitted to my graduate program had I not attended such a top school ... I never would have made it on my grades, essays, or test scores). In other cases, I don't really fully see how or why I had more opportunities. I suspect that I got more opportunities, better curriculum, and higher achieving classmates in grade school and high school, but I'm not sure.

My educational opportunities in grade school and high school were certainly influenced by where I happened to live. My schools were OK, but I know now that there were private schools and wealthy suburban schools that had far more resources, fewer students per teacher, more counseling, and more of other opportunities. My schools were fine—they are not like what I see in pictures of inner city Detroit schools, for example—but they didn't have a lot of "extras" that might have made a difference. For example, I really had no advising about colleges even though I was a top student in my high school.

On the other hand, my college opportunities had a lot to do with how much money my family had while I was growing up. My dad had a good job in the federal government and my mom was a community college administrator. My family wasn't exactly rich, but when it came time for college they had the resources to support me going to a top (and very expensive) college. It also helped that they went to college themselves: They never questioned whether it would be worth the money, and they certainly expected me to go to college somewhere.

I know enough to realize that being a white male has to have changed my educational opportunities and experiences in important ways. I'm not sure I can really articulate how, though. I suppose that most racial/ethnic minority students face obstacles and challenges that I didn't have to face. Maybe it was as subtle as assumptions that people made about how smart or promising I was. I also suppose that most women face challenges in schools—perhaps especially in math and science—that I didn't face. It's hard for me to clearly say how or why being a white male gave me more opportunities and improved my experiences. I have no idea how my orientation as a heterosexual made any difference in my educational career. Again, my guess is that it's a matter of my not facing challenges that other people had to face. Part of the extraordinary luxury and advantage of being a heterosexual white male is that I haven't had to battle issues related to these things. Part of the work of my life (and part of the work I'll ask some students in this class to do) has been to be more aware of my advantages and how they affect other people.

I think that my success in my educational career—valedictorian in high school, great college, top PhD program—are due to a mix of a lot of hard work, a fair amount of good luck, and (at least to some degree) some accidents of birth. I know that hard work mattered for my success: If I hadn't worked hard in high school, I wouldn't have made it to Carleton. If I hadn't worked hard in college, I wouldn't have been accepted in my PhD program. If I hadn't worked hard there, I wouldn't have been successful. But, being a white male with relatively well-off parents absolutely made a difference (for reasons explained above). I'm also sure that good luck has helped at various points along the way. For example, I more or less picked my college randomly. I could easily have gone to a school that suited me worse, or that didn't give me the opportunities Carleton did. For another example, there was a lot of luck involved in my applying and being admitted to my PhD program; there was even more great good luck in finding the faculty mentor that I found. Again, just by luck it could easily have gone much worse. So, it's a mixture: The advantages of being born a moderately well-off heterosexual white male, some good luck, and hard work led to success. I don't know where'd I'd be without all three.

Can anybody “get ahead” in America? I think every single person has *some* chance of being successful. The chances are higher if the person works hard. The chances may be lower if (for example) the person has less money or is a racial/ethnic minority. And, for every person, luck is involved. Good things and bad things totally out of the person’s control can matter. What this all adds up to is this: Hard work is usually necessary for “getting ahead.” But, it doesn’t guarantee it. Bad luck happens. And, people not lucky enough to be born into circumstances and bodies and families like mine sometimes face obstacles that limit how much they can “get ahead” regardless of their good luck or hard work. Can anybody “get ahead” by getting a good education? Sure. Will everybody? No. Who gets ahead depends on a combination of hard work, luck, and accidents of birth.

[ I note that I have said nothing about other people besides teachers—like coaches, clergy, or other adults—who might have shaped my education. I really didn’t have any people like that. Also, I note that I have not said anything about the role of religion or spirituality in my educational career. Again, that didn’t really play a role in my life growing up. ]