

In 2017 I decided to pursue a Doctorate to further my career and become a role model. In a rush, after considering a few programs, I applied to and chose to attend the University of Pittsburgh beginning in the summer of 2018. I wanted to be a role model for young people of color who may be first-generation students or from a low-income background like I was. I want them to know it is possible to navigate the higher education system successfully. I am now 42 years old and can reflect on my journey in a letter to my 18-year-old self.

Dear 18-year-old Dr. Johnson,

Where you came from will not prepare you for what you will encounter on this educational journey. The only green space you know of is Fairmont Park in Philadelphia, which, quite frankly, in hindsight, was not the safest place to be. The only white people you have encountered personally were teachers, business owners, police officers, and other authority figures. Going to college is an idea that does not seem like an option for you, but you will listen to your high school science teacher, who will encourage you to pursue this option. Being the first in your family to attend college, you will be clueless about the college application process; you would not even know what to look for in a college, but trust me, it will work out. One day out of the blue, it seems, a black male admissions representative who grew up in the same neighborhood as you will visit your high school and convince you that his university is a good fit for you. Although not apparent to you what that means, it will be that representation that convinces you to apply. You will apply and get accepted without ever visiting the state university located about 4 hours away in the rolling mountains of Pennsylvania.

When you arrive on campus, you will encounter a place completely different from where you grew up or have ever been. There will be mountains, trees, and a LOT of white people. There will not be any malls and other conveniences that you were used to growing up in the city. The local community being predominantly white, will feel cold and unwelcoming. Things will be slightly better once on campus, but there will only be approximately one to two hundred black and brown (ALANA or BIPOC) students on a campus of about three thousand. There will not be many faculty or staff who look like you either. Not sure if you know what these words mean, but you will face microaggressions, microaggressions, stereotype threats, and often outright racism displayed in the local community.

You were a good student in high school, but the public school system did not challenge you. You will quickly discover that you were unprepared for college's academic rigor and expectations. Being a first-generation student (even though you did not know that was a thing), you will not know how to navigate college life; you will not know where to go for help or even how to ask for help. You will not know how to study, manage your schedule, communicate with classmates, communicate with faculty, or apply for and maintain your financial aid. All these things will contribute to a lack of success early on, and you will even question many times if you made the right decision by going to college. In high school, you had value as an athlete, member of the band, and a popular peer group; however, you are just another body on campus going through the motions in college.

After three semesters as a broadcast journalism major and a track and cross-country team member, you will grow bored with both. You will realize that a career in broadcast journalism was not right for you partially due to a professor's comments and lack of confidence in your ability due to your speech and use of "slang" in your work. Your teammate and friend, who will remain a friend throughout your life, had decided to transfer to another state university. You also chose to transfer to the same institution in the Spring of 1999 and major in health and physical education, which would prepare you well for your future career in athletics. Things at your new university will be very similar when considering the local community and campus population; however, you will find yourself on academic probation with a .937 GPA after your first semester.

At 20 years old, you will feel like you have hit a crossroads. You will contemplate what is next and realize that college may not be for you. Many of your friends and family will call your next move irrational or even crazy. After a random visit to an Army recruiting station, you were shipped to basic training for the Army Reserves on the eve of your 20th birthday. This decision is nuts, you will think to yourself, but you will enjoy the next thirteen weeks in training and do things you never thought you could do. The army experience will do great things for you; you will develop skills that will translate into your future life and work experiences. Still, upon arriving home after training, you realize that although your family and friends are supportive, none of them understand what you are going through as a failing college student, and no one can give you the advice you need. After much thought into a decision that will make sense to you, you decide not to return to school the following fall. You have decided that the military will be your focus and finding a full-time job. You will even consider joining the military full time or going to school to become a barber; however, there will be hesitation for both. Unsure of what caused this hesitation, you continue to work odd jobs at home. It will be one job that impacts your future. Working for a beverage company that will require you to move products and stock supermarket shelves is what will make you realize you need to continue your education. The amount of physical labor that this job requires will be an eye-opening experience for you; you did not want to work a job that requires that much physical labor for the rest of your life.

On your way home one evening after a long rough day at your manual labor job, you decide it is time to give school another shot. The next day you call to see if it is even possible to enroll in classes even though the semester has already begun. The answer will be yes, and just like that, you will be on your way back to school. On that phone call, you will learn that your academic probation status will still be in place; your .937 GPA will stand, and you will need to get your GPA back to 2.0 to remain in school for the following semester. Because of the probationary status, you would not be eligible for financial aid, but thankfully your GI Bill would cover your tuition right away. Although you accept the challenge, you know it is not possible, realistically. You arrive back on campus four days into the semester with no housing nor a plan for how to be a successful student. With no permanent place to live, you will bounce around to friends' dorm rooms and houses for a week until you find a place to live with three female students.

Once again, you will question if you are meant to be in college. You would not progress toward a degree in two full years as a student. You made a significant life decision by joining the

military, changing majors, and now you are no longer a student-athlete; the one thing that gave you a purpose as a college student. You will go from being an unsure eighteen-year-old to an unsure twenty-year-old on your second time around, still trying to figure it out. You will see many people just like you come and go. The three young women you ended up rooming with that semester will begin a ripple effect of connections to various peer groups that will bring new value to your college experience. That semester you will meet people who had aspirations that you had not thought of, were involved on campus, had mentors, and had somehow figured out how to be successful students. At the end of the spring semester, your hard work would have paid off by earning a 2.1 GPA, which in many students' eyes isn't that good, but for you, it is a long way from where you were just a year ago. However, you will not reach the 2.0 cumulative standard, therefore being academically dismissed. Once again, defeat will come over you and that familiar feeling of not belonging! You spend the next couple of days packing and figuring out what to do next.

You will head back home to Philadelphia again with no plan and no one to advise you properly. Your official dismissal letter comes in the mail, and as you read, you will learn that there is an appeal process. You will figure that you have come too far to give up, so you write what you think is a convincing letter in which you express regret and a plan for committing to becoming a better student. You will be reinstated on a probationary status in what feels like a miracle and head back to campus for summer courses. And it is at this point; you will not look back; you will no longer feel as if you do not belong; you will no longer feel defeated. For the subsequent five semesters, the lowest GPA you earn will be 2.74. Then, in August 2002, you will finally graduate and earn your bachelor's degree. Not only will you be proud of yourself, but your family will also be.

What changed? After taking time away from school, you realized you were not involved on campus; the successful individuals you met had been active members of clubs and leaders on campus. You would begin to get involved on campus, you squeezed four years' worth of involvement into two years, and those experiences are what changed your life. During those two years, you will participate in clubs such as the Black Students Union, The Gospel Choir, and The Distinguished Gentlemen. You would become a Student Assistant Coach for the Men's Basketball team and a Resident Assistant. Eventually, you will even hold leadership positions in some of these groups. These experiences will provide opportunities to network, build relationships, travel, and teach you how to be a leader. Ultimately these experiences will contribute to your professional development and sense of belonging.

Your college career will be changed because you seek opportunities to get involved and interact with people. It is not that you became smarter; you just felt like you belonged and built a support network. As a result, you will approach graduation in the summer of 2002 and feel like you were just getting started. You will be happy to graduate because it has been a long road, but you wish you had two more years to take advantage of all the opportunities that finally presented themselves. This excitement will lead you to apply for graduate school, a career in higher education, and ultimately earn your doctorate.

Most importantly, your lived student experiences will help you every day in your career in higher education. You will become a student-centered professional who is in tune with students' struggles and their need to belong. You will share your stories and experiences as you mentor students and guide them through a similar journey you have faced. You will make a difference!

Sincerely,

*Dr. Andrew Johnson Jr.*

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