

SAMSON X. LIM Scholarship Essay

What It Means To Me To Be a First Generation Law Student

At a very basic level, my identity as a first-generation law student is rooted in my father's dreams. My family emigrated from Singapore when I was only six weeks old, because my father had been accepted to seminary in Portland, Oregon, to pursue his master's in divinity. Given my father's goal of becoming a missionary, we never intended to make the United States our permanent home. However, fate had other plans. In the third grade, I sprained an ankle playing basketball, but within months, I began experiencing difficulty controlling my muscles. After countless doctor visits, I was finally diagnosed with a rare neurological movement disorder called dystonia. By fifth grade, I could no longer walk without braces and crutches, and by sixth grade, I needed a wheelchair.

Growing up with a physical disability posed unquestionably difficult challenges both in and out of school. I experienced bullying in the classroom, misunderstandings in public, and perpetual mental frustration; however, those same challenges also taught me to empathize with others, to have patience in difficult circumstances, and to remain optimistic despite the vicissitudes of life. After nearly six years in a wheelchair, I underwent a nine-hour surgery called Deep Brain Stimulation, in which electrodes were placed into my brain to send electrical waves to block the "wrong signals" being sent to my muscles. For the first time in years, I could control my muscles again. Feeling as if I had been afforded a new lease on life inspired me even more to live with purpose — fully aware that I could be back in a wheelchair if this medical technology were ever to fail.

I entered college with a strong conviction to "pay it forward," after applying for over 75 and winning 18 scholarships in high school. Many of my peers had foregone scholarship applications either because they did not know about them or did not feel confident they could be successful. This revelation inspired me to create Scholarship Junkies, a nonprofit scholarship resource program dedicated to supporting students through the scholarship application process. To date, Scholarship Junkies' near-peer model has helped hundreds of students secure over \$25 million collectively in scholarships.

My experience in working with high school students around the country exposed me to the acute challenges that low-income, first-generation students face when schools lack resources and a college-going culture. From homelessness to poverty to sexual violence, my students' lives had been shaped by myriad factors beyond their control, but in turn, the nuanced understanding I gained pushed me to consider ways to amplify student voices further. While this direct-service work afforded me the chance to make a rewarding impact, I continually wondered how the positive effects of successful programs might affect more lives. I concluded that public policy was the ultimate answer, eventually leading me to Teachers College, Columbia University, where I mastered the skills necessary to analyze and implement effective policy.

Upon graduation, I moved to Washington, D.C., working as a graduate policy research intern at the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP). But during my brief foray into the policy world of the federal government, I realized that my understanding of public policy and its impact on our most vulnerable populations would likely have little effect unless I had "a seat at the table." While I could analyze policies and legislation, I wanted to make a greater impact and realized that a legal education would equip me with the legal analysis and advocacy skills to achieve that goal. I came to see that my experiences as an Asian American with a physical disability who would be the first in my family to attend law school were convincingly pointing me toward law school with three major themes in mind — representation, advocacy, and inclusion:

Representation - A 2017 study by California Supreme Court Justice Goodwin Liu found that "few Asian Americans appear motivated to pursue law in order to gain a pathway into government or politics." I am one of those few. I did not grow up seeing many Asian Americans pursue public office let alone receive opportunities to lead at the highest levels of law. In pursuing

law as a route to public service, I am guided by my belief that access to education can lead to collective economic prosperity and cultivate more thoughtful civic engagement in our democracy, that no student who wishes to pursue higher education should be deprived of the opportunity because of life circumstances, and that the ills of society must be corrected to ensure that all Americans can lead meaningful lives. Essentially, what drives me is a simple creed: positively impact the lives of others by addressing real needs with thoughtful, effective solutions. A rigorous legal education combined with my background in policy analysis and community work will be crucial to meeting this goal.

Advocacy - I aim to enhance my policy analysis skills and program management experience through a legal education, because laws must ensure equitable opportunity where societal circumstances cannot. As a lawyer, I will be able to advocate in courtrooms and within the government, spaces in which I might have less effectiveness otherwise. Already, in my first weeks of law school, I have co-authored a public comment on the Department of Education's proposal to rescind gainful employment regulations and supported undergraduate students through the appeals process for food stamp benefits to address food insecurity at UC Berkeley. In the coming months, I plan to apply for the Student Regent position on the University of California Board of Regents to represent more than 238,000 students in the UC system to advocate for curbing tuition increases, providing more affordable housing, and ensuring food security. I also intend to apply for summer legal internship positions with the U.S. Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee and the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau to gain further experience in advocating to protect consumers, workers, and the public.

Inclusion - Beyond representation, being a part of the legal community allows me to lead inclusively. By this, I mean that my experiences growing up with dystonia taught me what it feels like when you are seen as "the other" or when you're being left out for any reason. The legal community is extremely accomplished with myriad ambitious individuals. Yet, as I have often seen and heard from law school graduates who have come before me, there seems to be a lack of inclusion along various lines of identity, whether racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, gender, specialization, physical disability, or otherwise. As I have always done, I intend to pursue my legal career with a sense of inclusion to help ensure that one of the most respected and important professions in society is a space in which all viewpoints are heard and respected.

My parents always taught my sisters and me to serve our community, and they have always empowered us to pursue our education to become the most effective we can be in our work. I came to law school, so I could become the most effective advocate and leader I can be. In some ways, the moment my doctors diagnosed me with dystonia ended my father's dreams of becoming a missionary, because my physical condition made it impossible for us to leave the United States - a development for which I am most thankful today. Yet, just as I witnessed my father's advocacy on my behalf as I battled dystonia, it is humbling now to do the same for others. Thus, even though part of me feels responsible for trampling his dream, a larger part of me feels proud to honor his vision of working hard, acting honorably, and doing what is right -- indeed, what it means for me to be a first-generation law student.