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## Campolindo Alumni Spotlight

*Colleen O'Brien*



My name is Colleen O'Brien, and I graduated from Rheem in 2006, JM in 2009, and Campolindo in 2013. At present, I'm a junior at Hamilton College in upstate New York. Because there tends to be a lot of confusion amongst Californians, I want to go on record saying that I'm surrounded by farmland, mountains, Finger Lakes, and cows, *not* NYC skyscrapers. Hamilton allows its students the option of creating their own interdisciplinary concentrations, so I technically major in "Literary, Developmental, and Sociocultural Theories of Education" (but when people ask, I just say "English, Psychology, and Education"). I'm loving and savoring each moment at Hamilton.

Now that I've aged out of Moraga's schools, I would like to share a little bit about how I've come to see my education in retrospect.

Looking back, the first truly exceptional educational experience I can remember started around second grade and continued through my graduation from Rheem. I have always been a daydreamer, and in elementary school, this began to manifest itself in a spacey-ness that inhibited my ability to stay organized and on-task. Instead of scolding me each time my mind wandered, my teachers created special goal charts for me. In my mind's eye, I can still see the look on my teachers' faces when I would finally accomplish everything on the list. Their eyes and smiles glowed with vicarious accomplishment.

While at Campo, I involved myself in a broad range of activities: I swam, wrote for the school newspaper, and played the clarinet in the school band as well as in the pit orchestra of the annual musical. I tried things. I dipped my toes into lots of pools. Now I have access to infinitely more pools, and I'm not afraid to get a little wet. Hamilton actually has an open curriculum (no general ed. classes!), so I've had loads of opportunities to be timid. But I know how to jump in. Ballet? Sure! Backpacking in the local Adirondack mountains? Why not? A semester in Denmark? Count me in!

Lest this piece be taken as an unequivocal extolment of the virtues of the Moraga school system, it is worth disclaiming the following: on my own personal believability scale, a *perfect* school system is on par with the tooth fairy. In my 13 years in school in Moraga, I learned so incredibly

much about myself, the world around me, and the worlds I couldn't see. The sobering reality, however, is that no system can be all things to all people.

That being said, I find myself humbled and inspired by the fact that Moraga's parents, teachers, and administrators persist in an asymptotic struggle toward that unattainable perfection. There is a collective appreciation of the importance of each student's individual development. Regardless of whether a student seizes the tools laid out before her, she is provided with the space and opportunity to grow into herself.

Since I have been at Hamilton, I have spent a significant amount of time tutoring students from nearby Utica, a formerly booming factory town turned epicenter of unemployment, low-SES, violence, and grossly inadequate education. In my experiences with school systems in Utica, I have found that struggling students are too-often, too-soon abandoned. The human beings who slip through the cracks quickly become statistics.

I would be lying if I said there was not a part of me that felt a bit guilty the first time I encountered an eight-year-old boy whose reading proficiency was worse than mine was at six. It took me a few weeks to realize the following: *the problem is not that I don't deserve the exceptional education I've received, the problem is that this boy deserves the same.* I've been given a gift, and instead of wishing I hadn't received it, I've decided to use this privilege to extend to other students the same opportunities that have been extended to me. My current life trajectory is pointed toward teaching, where I will get to pass on the enthusiasm, energy and love of the written word that all my teachers in Moraga have so generously given to me.

I suppose the best way to end is with a sincere, whole-hearted THANK YOU to all of those who have championed my personal development over the years. I wouldn't be where and who I am without you.