Serving Generations and Caring for Communities

“We want to help them [first generation college students] understand that education is a pathway to a better life.” Robert Robinson is director of multicultural student affairs at the University of North Georgia, and was explaining to writer Karen Doss Bowman the value of their Trailblazers Club.

Of course first generation students aren’t new. They’ve always been part of an institution’s student profile. I attended a small college in the Midwest, “back in the day,” and many of my classmates were first generation students. It wasn’t unusual and they weren’t singled out. They were invariably Caucasian, their parents were likely second or third generation Americans, they had rural or small town backgrounds and, while they weren’t rich, they weren’t poor either. Most importantly they had parents who said to them, “I never went to college, but I want you to have opportunities I didn’t.” They knew they wanted a pathway to a better life for their children and a college education could offer that opportunity.

During my career in higher education, I saw the profile of first generation students change over the years. With those changes came the realization for many educators that these students confront a variety of challenges: cultural, financial, academic, and social. In her story, “Fondness for Firsts,” Bowman does an excellent job of capturing AASCU members’ commitment to their first generation students, interviewing presidents, staff, and students. And as she points out, this commitment embodies our state colleges and universities promise of opportunities for all.

My staff and I had our “own” first generation student this summer. Joe Zulick attended Indiana University of Pennsylvania and served his communications internship at AASCU prior to graduating. I encourage you to read Joe’s ”My First Generation Story” on page 15. A pathway to a better life.

“Stewards of place” as a characterization of AASCU members is never more evident than during a crisis in their communities. “In the Wake of Tragedy,” takes a look at the crucial role our state colleges and universities have played in both high profile situations—Orlando’s gay nightclub shooting and Flint, Michigan’s contaminated water crisis—as well as during floods, fires and heat waves. As John Saltmarsh says “…AASCU institutions…they’re of the community.”

I have to commend our two Steve’s—Stephen Pelletier, author of “Clinton, Trump and Higher Ed,” and Steven Walker the artist who created the cover art and story illustrations. Stephen walked a fine, non-partisan line in his efforts to write about the candidates’ higher education policy positions and what we can expect. And he was able to develop a useful, substantive article despite a dearth of solid information on one side of the aisle. Steven’s cover illustration is truly representative of the old—but often apt—adage, “A picture is worth a thousand words.” Enjoy!

S.M.C.