William D. transcript

CCSF class of 2010

Brown University Class of 2012

**Tell me about your high school experience and thoughts after high school with regards to college**

When I first started high school, I had this… I went to Lowell High School and it’s the crème dela crème of high schools, especially among Asian American parents. I had the chance to go to Lowell or School of the Arts and a lot of my friends were at Lowell, and it just seemed like a better choice. My parents were encouraging it. It was very stressful I would say. Lots of studying and it was really competitive. Everyone had to know each other’s grades and SAT scores. I found solace in music – like that was the one thing I always looked forward to – my orchestra classes and that was one reason why I almost went to a conservatory instead of a university for college. I didn’t like high school. I did all right, but I hated the culture of Lowell. Some of the teachers were fantastic, and some of the teachers were only there because …. They called Lowell the retirement school for a lot of the instructors. People were just there to throw out the material and they don’t necessarily have to teach – and because students are pretty bright, they will still learn the material. I didn’t really appreciate that, but after graduating Lowell in 2008, I had actually applied to Ivies and UCs and the conservatory in New York that I got into (Juliard) for orchestral conducting and I chose UC San Diego – it was sort of a compromise. It was close by but not too far and I was studying music and econ there. My initial thoughts were that this place was huge. I wasn’t used to an 800-student economics class, and at the time, at the time I felt that I wanted to do business and UC San Diego has a management science program, and I eventually went towards that route meaning wanting to do business because I suppose I was somewhat wanted to make money and I felt like I could do better than UC San Diego (as strange as this sounds) and I felt that it wasn’t affording me the opportunity to learn about business as I wanted to. So I contemplated leaving. My parents were completely against it. They told me not to try to transfer (after a quarter) and they said stay longer. You might like it. I told them that I didn’t like it, it was too big, and that I wanted a smaller environment. I ultimately made a decision to transfer and at the time, the most humbling thing was to transfer to a community college and to see that as a temporary gateway. My heart kind of sank because truthfully, going to Lowell, you’re brought up in the environment where you should be going to a UC or an Ivy League and it’s almost shameful to go to community college.

My original perception of CCSF was that it was a place for students who don’t know what they’re doing, students who want to save money, which is understandable and students who didn’t do well in high school and I thin k that is still the pervasive mentality at Lowell. The moment I went, I was like, “oh shit. I want to get out as soon as possible and my goal was to transfer out of CCSF in a year and a half and just go there, make the most of it and utilize as many of the resources as possible and to try to be somewhat detached from the CCSF community. At the time, I was very arrogant and had a selfish mentality that I was here to take as much as I can, and to leave and transfer and I am too good for this place.

That how things had changed a little when I had gone to CCSF because I pursued business and met some of the best instructors. I was floored by how small the classes were and the instructors were there because they actually wanted to teach. And that was something I had not quite experienced when I was at UC San Diego. You can talk to them and there was a lot of that bullshit advertisement when you go to a UC or a private college as I later did where they say, “the professors are very approachable and you can talk to them during office hours. At CCSF, you can talk to them during or after class and they actually care what you are pursuing and how you’re doing in class. And so, I actually met some of my closest friends at CCSF and they shared a strong passion of mine in starting a club and I actually started something called the Undergraduate Investment Group (UIG) because at the time my buddies and I were interested in finance and investing and there wasn’t really an outlet for that at CCSF, so we decided we would start the club and we would have Susan Berston as our sponsor our club and her support was great because at the time, we didn’t know what the hell we were doing. The clubs that existed they were there for resume and transcript holders (inaudible) but in all honesty, we did start it does benefit us to have a leadership role and leadership title when applying to college and universities and transferring out. We generally were interested (inaudible) and a lot of the students see the college as a commuter school and so this provided that sense of belonging and it just felt like warm and in an otherwise environment where I don’t see any of my friends and I just see my friends outside of classes. And I was just surprised to see how successful the club was and people came and were genuinely interested. The egos were at the door and no one was trying to brag about the hot shot investor if they traded. They were just interested in and that is something that I miss too. You didn’t have to prove yourself.

**You decide to leave San Diego – how did you decide to come to CCSF and not try to transfer to another four year college?**

It was in San Francisco and it seemed to have offered a plethora of courses – it had a ton of courses versus the other community colleges I was researching. I was also interested in, at the time, Haas (UC Berkeley) and its business program and it seemed at the time easier to transfer from a community college to a UC seemed to be the most sensible route. I was dead set on Berkeley. That was my goal. I was. I was. I didn’t really dream, to be honest, about transferring to other universities and the only UC that I wanted to apply to was Berkeley. If I didn’t get in, I would be screwed but that was my decision. I took 24 or 25 units per semester and honors courses. I really wanted to hedge my bets, so the majority of my classes were honors, and even if they didn’t offer honors, I would ask the professor to write a year end semester research paper to qualify as honors and luckily the honors program was very forgiving about that and they accepted that. I am grateful for CCSF because I felt – it was an identity that I became very proud of being part of CCSF because of all of the instructors and my peers. I became very proud of CCSF over time I felt the sense of belonging and identify and I am grateful for instructors such as Susan Berston and my peers – I felt that I could dream a little bit, dream a little bit more and that’s why I took that leap and applied to Brown University and a few other private colleges – places I wouldn’t dream of prior to coming to CCSF – and with the support from Susan and Goldsmith (economics), they wrote me recommendations and I worked my ass off and somehow I was lucky and got to Brown and it was that crises too of OK, I had also gotten in UC Berkeley’s Haas and I can sit close by and sit with that trajectory or take that leap, go to Providence and attend Brown.

And thank you for allowing me to be a part of this. I don’t think I have ever crystalized my thoughts about how CCSF has made such an impact on my life. And I thank you for interviewing me with regards to this and taking the time to think about how CCSF has been such an integral part of my life and has been a big part of my journey as to where I am today, so thank you.

**How did you navigate the system at CCSF?**

I first went to a counselor and that didn’t work out quite honestly. They just recommended a bunch of classes and they said I couldn’t transfer and that I had to stay at least two years even though I had some credits from UC San Diego and they told me to aim for a state college. I was a little put off to be quite frank. I just researched it on my own ([www.assist.org](http://www.assist.org)) and did it that way. I forget which courses I had to take and which seemed the most interesting. That’s one of the things I really appreciate about CCSF and the prereqs and requirements when applying to a university is that you have a bunch of courses that are listed under life sciences, math and especially life sciences where you can take environmental science or even the business requirements – you can take a bunch of business classes and it’s funny CCSF and its course offerings were similar to that of Brown (University) where it felt like you could – even though you have to take prerequisites, you can explore and that’s quite beautiful.

In terms of navigating, I am a San Francisco native, so it wasn’t too new to me. I did see a commuter school at the very beginning, but I began to look forward to staying at CCSF, as in not leaving school right after classes ended as I made my friends and as I invested more in the club I started.

**How did you build community at CCSF?**

I am more grateful that the community accepted me and that I just happened to have an interest. I mean, the community was always there at CCSF, I think I just happened to play a part in introducing a small niche of an interest (investments) that happened to attract people to it and so another thing too was food plays a huge part. I remember clubs didn’t really offer food and we would meet around 4 or 5 pm and students were generally hungry and we also get a small little stipend (thankfully) and we would use those funds to buy pizza and drinks, and so, students would come probably for the food, but hopefully they would learn something about investments or have a playful discussion about investments. The community really brightened up and it no longer felt like going to get your resume title, you’re there because you want to be there and you can eat food and those who are like minded and you can have fun. So, yes, the clubs and the teachers are just great.

**How would you rate the instruction and the professors at CCSF – and then compared to your four-year experience at Brown University.**

Very similar in terms of the instructors. I would say the instructors in terms of teaching – Brown because of its huge endowment and reputation can afford to have smaller classes (by small, it can be up to 50 for a large lecture, or as small as 5-6 people) vs. at CCSF, most of the classes I took at most were probably at most, maybe 30. I never felt I needed to take large lecture hall type of class. The number one thing I do remember is that the instructors at CCSF were not there for research. A lot of them don’t have Ph.Ds – contrary to traditional professors, but they were there because they actually wanted to teach. That is something I came to appreciate in retrospect upon leaving CCSF. They were passionate and they were opinionated, but they wanted to make sure that the students actually cared about learning and they also kept in touch with you – they cared about you outside of classes, especially instructors who sponsored clubs. They cared about your trajectory and what you were going to do outside of CCSF. When I transferred to Brown, interactions were similar. The professors also care, but they were also research professors. They were a little less intimate in that, you know, they don’t necessarily get to understand you on a personal level because they have a lot on their plates because they teach small classes, they can still, somewhat get to know you. I guess a little less intimate at Brown, but I am grateful because I think I had a lot of resources at Brown and the alumni network is very strong and the professors – if you do need a recommendation for grad school or if you need a reference to someone that they know who can help – I started a startup while at Brown and professors would try to connect you whomever they knew. It is also in their best interests to help their students.

**What is your greatest memory of CCSF?**

My greatest memory at CCSF was starting the Undergraduate Investment Group. I think it was the culmination of – how much I enjoyed CCSF and how I so became brave enough to start something while at CCSF and meanwhile, the rejection of what I had originally stereotyped CCSF to be. I think by starting the organization with friends and I started the organization as someone asking CCSF to give me permission to be part of this community and to accept and I think I drew strength from that. That’s probably my greatest memory.

**How did it feel when you got your acceptance letters and how did your paradigm shift while at CCSF transferring to a UC and realizing you could shoot higher?**

I was overwhelmed with joy when I got UC Berkeley’s letter first online. I just remember I was at the computer and I screamed my lungs out in my room. If I didn’t get in anywhere else, that was perfectly fine, because this is what I set out for.

And then when I got my acceptance letter from the other universities and particularly Brown, I felt numb – in the sense that I wasn’t actually prepared for that – I didn’t think I would be able to get it, but a part of me felt that I had a chance to just because I was at CCSF and I felt that I had done a pretty decent job at CCSF and because I was at CCSF, I had a chance – having the resources to start a club, having the instructors support me and being able to do well in classes and negotiate and get the honors courses (total of 15) or create courses that were not originally honors. Creating honors courses and speaking with instructors was a really good learning opportunity and of course it is your prerogative to learn and research deeper into the subject. I was confident after I got accepted into those universities. I thought I was intimidated (I eventually chose Brown) and I realized that the transfer people had a different perspective – they were more humble than the traditional students at Brown and I appreciate that – it made the transition for me much easier. As I gradually took classes, I am confident in my abilities and I realized that this university is very similar to any other university. You will have students who are bright and very intelligent who you will be humbled by and then there will be those who slack off. The notion that an ivy league or a highly ranked university is necessary for success isn’t so.

**What can CCSF do better?**

I think CCSF could improve on a couple of things. I would say providing more direction to students and try to foster what their interests are – I think counseling – but maybe not just counseling but more of a blueprint – certainly most students transfer to state college – but if a student has an interest – understanding what they want to do and understanding their long term goal a vocational one, just to get certain credits to qualify for certain jobs, or is it because they want to transfer to a state college and understand why and understand what subjects they want to pursue and the counselor can help customize and plan the experience of a CCSF student so that they can take certain courses or if they want to dream bigger – understand why UC might be a good fit for them. Or if a student has a lofty goal of going to an Ivy league, understand why and foster that. Don’t shut them down. I think that if I had taken the advice of my first counselor and just not dream big, I wouldn’t be here, I would be where I am today. I also understand that counselors are also trying to be realistic – but CCSF students they’re already fighting a stereotype of going to a commuter school or maybe they struggled in high school or maybe they’re experiencing something in their personal lives that has led them to where they are today to go to another university and maybe they just want a new beginning – and with that, it is imperative that CCSF tries its best to encourage students to dream, encourage students to reach very high so that they actually look forward to their experience – so they can certainly work on that. Guiding students, planning classes, the application process, I had to navigate that on my own. More resources for that. Personal statements – I think that’s one area that is very important. I can’t speak for everyone, with the groups I hung out with, most of them just wanted to transfer so personal statements are important too and providing mentorship on that and understanding that students who are interested in applying to Haas, what kind of essay and study should they focus on writing and not writing a cookie-cutter essay that might not work – and same thing with a private school personal statement, which is also very different. CCSF is very capable and that by promoting these types of themes, it’s a little bit of a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you’re trying to attract more students, CCSF should be a place where you can dream and reach for certain goals academically and vocationally.

Another way CCSF could improve is providing more opportunities for students interested in internships. I was lucky enough to get an introduction through Susan Berston, whereas, if CCSF could put more energy into connecting students with opportunities that would be great. CCSF should push for that. Not only do students wish to build a network and get some social capital, internship experience is essential for transferring.

**What were your goals after college? And now?**

My life has been sort of very strange – when I was at CCSF, I was juggling the thought of being an entrepreneur, and at the same time, also being interested in finance. When I went to Brown, I had the opportunity of being part of a startup – a women’s startup that sold prenatal supplements – while interning at an investment bank, Barclay’s and the common trajectory of Ivy League students – especially those with a business trajectory – is to go into consulting or investment banking. I interned there at Barclay’s and I realized that I didn’t quite fit that culture and it was like (inadubile) and I was there for a few years and I left in 2013 still holding an advisory role and shares and I was interested in being part of Silicon Valley and starting a tech and it failed because of a co-founder dispute and I thought I would take a break from that – and I realize that looking back, most of my experiences have been an aggregation of an interest in food.

I realized that after my startup experiences starting companies post college that my experience has been an aggregation of an interest in food. When I started Premama, I was drawn to the natural foods industry and when I started Nibbol, I remember my escape was cooking every single day – that was the number one thing that I looked forward two. I remember that after my second company had failed that I thought I would just take a break from starting companies – and the business world. And maybe I will just try to understand food.

So, I took this leap of faith, and again, my parents were shocked – by then, I think they had already given up and they said, “let’s just let William do what he is interested in – and he will figure it out.” I worked at a restaurant called State Bird Provisions for a year and a half and it was incredibly humbling, long hours but being able to understand and source the best ingredients possible and flavor combinations, understanding what it is like to work in a restaurant and appreciating what goes behind the scenes – it’s a very thankless job. It made me fall in love with food even more. I had this goal where I wanted to start a restaurant – which is one of the stupidest things too – lowest margins, brick and mortar, high fixed costs, high operational costs as a result of wages, high physical labor, probably you don’t have weekends and from an investment standpoint, maybe 2% if you’re lucky and as high as 10% in software it’s 90% gross margins. So, it’s again its very antithetical in saying that I am taking the hard route and not necessarily the road less traveled, but the road where people warn you not to go. It just draws me to do. I backpacked for four months in Asia to understand not only food and to learn noodle pulling but to understand my identity and where I came from and why I do this in the first place and I am very grateful for that and my goal is to start my own restaurant and the rational (inaudible) is to scale it -- I would like to change a lot of things. I would like to change how employees are treated. I would like to change the old French culture mentality of being an asshole in the kitchen – I don’t think you have to – not to say that State Bird was ever like that – they were great – but the change how not only food has dignity, but making sure your workplace has that too – and so that is the driving force right now and what really hits home. That’s what I want to do.

**Tell me how it feels to talk about and look back on your life and your beginnings at CCSF as compared to where you are today, Brown alum, two startups later and about to embark on a new endeavor?**

Being able to think about my CCSF experience and sharing it – it grounds me in the sense that I realize that by going to CCSF – CCSF at the time, when I transferred there in early 2009, I thought it was the riskiest thing in terms of my academic and also vocational career. By going to CCSF, I wondered, “where will I end up and what opportunities will be made available to me?” But fast forward 2016, and going through this roller coaster of a journey transferring to Brown, starting two startups and working in a restaurant, it’s kind of incongruent, but these experiences have happened I think because I took that risk at CCSF. Jumping to CCSF has taught me that I can pursue my interests until something feels right. When I transferred to CCSF, it eventually felt right, and every step of the way, it was about feeling, what is right and what can I look forward to – and obviously I am in this place where I am pursuing food – I have something to look forward to and CCSF affords that. I feel very proud every single day. I look back and I am actually more proud of my CCSF experience than my Brown one. I found it to be a more fulfilling one – because it reminds me of how humble the world is – that I can actually pursue something I want to – as nontraditional as it is. I am at times envious looking at my friends who stuck with their jobs whether they’re in finance, whether they’re at startups or large tech companies. And it’s tempting – especially being an outsider – knowing that I was previously part of that community and I could have taken those paths – and it is very tempting honestly – financial stability is a big part – well, my parents taught me to follow and it is sort of the more sensible, rational thing, right? But also, the part of me feels that I should pursue what I’m interested in -- and do it fairly well – and maybe making a living out of it. And I think it started because I took that leap at CCSF that I can afford it right now.