*Howard Lee*

*City College of San Francisco Class of 2011*

*Columbia University Class of 2013*

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*Tell me about your high school year:*

My single year of high school in 2001 was pretty miserable. My family moved to the states the summer before my senior year. By then, in high school there are groups and clicks – and as an immigrant, it is hard to fit in. It’s hard to even… you don’t have much resources. You don’t even know the questions to ask or the right person to ask. You just “welcome to the U.S., here’s your school district and good luck.”

*What were you thinking after high school?*

After high school, I thought I would do something related to biotech or research. It was the only subject I was kind of good at – that’s why I thought I would pursue a degree in biotech or molecular biology – or something along that career path, and you know, be a typical, however you want to put it – Asian. Get married, buy a house, form a family, what have you. That was kind of what was expected of me.

Yes, I applied to college after high school – a couple UCs and Cal States, but because of lack of preparation and not being informed enough, I didn’t take the TOEFL and as a new immigrant, I missed the application deadline. I was ineligible for any admission for technicalities, if you would.

I spent one year at CCSF in 2002-2003 and a summer. My first day at CCSF was again, fairly miserable. CCSF is a commuter school and again, it’s.. unless you know what questions to ask or who to ask, you don’t really get the support that you need – unless you already have a group of friend or a support network. It’s difficult to know what questions to ask or even where to ask. I knew a few people from high school, but they weren’t friend. We’d run into each other in the hallways, but that’s about it.

During the first year at CCSF, my mindset was focused on transferring and I was working toward the biotech certificate, so I finished that in my first year, but it was very challenging. It’s a pretty good program and you get connected with a lot of industry professionals and the professors, many are from research institutions (Genentech) or UCSF. You get connected and a good taste of what it is like to be working in the field. For me, I was trying to transfer but I didn’t know what school I wanted and I didn’t know a lot of programs. I just wanted to get a four year degree, get into the field, earn a salary, form a family, the whole nine yards.

I guess life has a plan for me and I ended up going to the army because I was so burned out and so exhausted from being in SF and what have you and it was time for a change and I joined the army.

*How’d you get introduced to the military?*

It was a postcard in the mail, and it said you join the navy, we have money for you. I stopped by the recruiting station and the navy guy wasn’t there, but the army guy was – and everything else is history.

*Tell me about your experience in the military. What’d you do for the five years?*

I joined the army because it guarantees you the training and the job that you would do in the army, and I was trying to leverage the military training to help me to get a little further ahead in education and technical proficiencies, so I actually picked a medical job – a medical specialist, and so it was kind of in line with what I wanted to be – a biotech – you know, technician lab operator, or whatever you want to call it. So that is what I have done for five years – doing medical testing, what have you. I spent the majority of my first tour in Maryland with a few months in Texas for training.

*You’re out and it’s 2008. What next? What are you thinking?*

Yes, I came back to SF, but I knew medical or biotech just wasn’t for me. I’ve done it, I’ve seen it, and I was one of the lab managers and it is just not my cup of tea. I had it for five years and again, I knew it wasn’t for me, but I didn’t know what I wanted to be at the point. So, with the GI bill being available to me, I said I might as well go back to school fulltime and figure it out from there.

*What was different when you came back to CCSF?*

It was a totally different experience – I think…. Driven by two factors – for one, I was a different person after the military -- I had a chance to really integrate myself into the US culture or the system, or however you want to call it the network, to tap into the support network and I had the sense of okay – this is how to transfer, this is what you need to do or to whom I should ask those questions. I was more informed and that made things a lot easier and I think the second reason was that CCSF was also changing. Back in the early 2000s, City College was that “misfit central.” That’s where everyone who couldn’t cut it to the big league or the big school, the misfit go there or whatever. But I think in 2008 or 2009 – I don’t know when that change happened, I see a lot more students that were accepted to four year school that went to four year school, for whatever reasons – personal or financial didn’t fit that typical four year kind of model. They return or they started at CCSF and then transferred out. I think that is a cultural shift in City College. But definitely, there was a shift in the culture. It was no longer that misfit central. It was like, “oh you’re going to City College – you’re the smart one not to spend all that money on those courses you can take.” But back then, it was looked down upon like you were too dumb to get into another school.

*Did you see a counselor when you came back the second time?*

I tapped into a lot of support resources, especially I would say the veteran counselor at City College that is assigned to the veteran affair office or whatever the name is – he made it like a one stop or step-by-step checklist and he made things straightforward and simple.

*What activities were you engaged in?*

Me and a couple of my classmates William Do, Jessica Gong and Ksenia founded UIG the Undergraduate Investment Group. I met William in the intro to business class and Will met Ksenia and Jessica somewhere else. I didn’t know them before, but he came and asked me if I would be interested and I said, “Sure, why not,” and then everything again is history.

*Where did you develop your sense of community in CCSF?*

I would say that a lot has to do with UIG. Even there’s a cultural shift at CCSF and it’s no longer the misfit central, but it’s still very much a commuter school of get-in and get out, transfer, certificate and still have a mindset of get in, get out, transfer or get your certificate to move on to something else, so people seem to have a mindset of wanting to be there for the class, get home and then get on to the other job for income or salary or what have you. I think when you realize that a lot of those students probably feel the same questions, fear or uncertainty as you – when you realize that, you’re not really.. by helping those students, you can learn. You don’t have to do everything yourself. If you can organize certain events for these events students, you can learn from it too and that has a lot to do with developing a sense of community like when you have that common fear or uncertainty, I think that really helps.

*Did you ever imagine that you would end up at Columbia University and how did that happen?*

For my transfer school, I would say that it was a complete accident. I still remember that day it was a transfer fair and I wasn’t planning on attending that because I had a class during that timeframe, but for whatever reason the instructor was ill that day and the class was canceled, so I stopped by the transfer faire to talk to different people and just to get a sense of what was going on and I stopped by Columbia’s booth. I mean, I didn’t think.. I wasn’t planning on talking to that person, but he struck up a conversation and we got talking and he insist on giving me the fee waiver for application and said, “go ahead and apply, you don’t know and the School of General Studies is very forgiving in terms of what you’ve done in the past and they want to evaluate you at that time when you apply and what your future potential is – so they’re willing to overlook some of the academic mistakes that you’ve made in the past, especially if you can demonstrate that there’s a clear break in the pattern. So, I applied and I used the waiver and the rest is history.

I had heard of Columbia and I knew it was a very prestigious school and it wasn’t on my list and it was so prestigious and out of reach, why would you even waste time?

*Did you have your sights set on UC Berkeley when you first came back to CCSF?*

Realistically, I was hoping for UCLA, but realistically I was planning for UC San Diego or UC Davis in the same sort of academic ranking. Not Berkeley- something about the town and that school – we just didn’t match up that well. Let’s put it this way.

My experience of professors at City College – it was awesome. They truly care about the student. They know the student by name. Some of the classes like calculus, business and political science – they have small classes so you actually get to know the professor and sometimes just to say hi and meet up for coffee just to see how they’re doing. These things I sort of took for granted once you get into your four-year school – the professors have the office hours and they just want to answer your question, get you through and just forget about you. They wouldn’t even know you were in their class the next semester.

*What is your greatest memory of City College of San Francisco?*

My greatest memory of City College of San Francisco I would have to say is the Bay Area Honors Symposium – you have a lot of City College student that just produce phenomenal, brilliant research work and you just say “wow.” You actually present those things in Berkeley or in Stanford and it makes you feel like, “you know what – City College is not that bad. We can hang with the big league.”

*How’d you get into Columbia?*

I did five or six honors classes mainly for the UC honors contract. I think I was TAG for… I can’t remember – Davis or San Diego – either one of those. UCLA looks favorable for honors classes, but they don’t have a TAG. It enhance your chances, but it…. Honestly, I don’t know how I got into Columbia – and you know, for those private schools it is any guess what those admission officers are thinking because again, they have more latitude who they admit unlike, you know UCs or Cal State everything is much structured and portioned for your GPA and personal statement and what have you, but for private schools they can look at you as a person. I also applied to four UCs (UCLA, San Diego, Davis and Santa Barbara) and I also applied to SFSU and Cal Poly, which is actually really competitive.

Did you feel prepared for your four-year school once you arrived? Did CCSF prepare you? Was it intimidating?

It was intimidating from an academic level --- especially coming from a community college. It’s like you’re not just in the big league in a school that has some certified Macarthur award genius. They don’t seem to study but yet them just seem to get everything, But that to me is intimidating but at the same time, one of my mentors back in the day gave me some advice – which was to “just run your own race.” All it means is that you’re probably not going to be able to beat them on a one-on-one basis, but it does mean that you can be above average, or be the best you can and run your own race.

What was the experience like at Columbia? Was it a tough transition?

It was a tough transition. The academic demand was much more rigorous than San Francisco. The experience was very intense. We studied a lot – especially for Columbia. It’s known to be a very … the students there study a lot in general. It’s not just the school of General Studies or the engineering school. Students at Columbia just study a lot in general. But what it is, I can’t pinpoint to a specific event or incident that really, in the way liberated from what was expected of me. That I don’t have to be that kind of “perfect Asian that graduated from whatever school and making six-figures right off the bat or going to the investment bank and that sort of thing.”

*Had you talked yourself into being the perfect Asian Investment Banker and going to that perfect school?*

Going to Columbia, it crossed my mind that it is actually, how would you say.. the stereotypical Asian going to Harvard and the expectation of being a lawyer, an investment banker, a doctor – yeah, definitely but I would say after the first or second semester, I realized that I just don’t fit that mold. I’m not that… I don’t care about money enough. I don’t care about fame.

*How were the professors at Columbia as compared to your little community college environment?*

They’re knowledgeable and definitely a subject matter expert in their own field. Columbia has a couple Nobel Laureates so if you’re studying in that major, you’re talking with people who are the epitome in that field and people got recognized for it. It was definitely very intellectually rewarding because you can pick their brains, you just learn so much and one of those times Joseph Stickler actually stopped by our recitation and he was explaining his model of rationing and that’s how he got his Nobel prize, and he didn’t have any lecture notes because he didn’t need any. Everything is in his brain. He doesn’t need any paper or any material – he can just spit it all back out.

*Did you build community at Columbia in the same way you did at CCSF?*

I would say the friends I made at City College I keep in touch with – I am better friends with people that I met at City College because you realize that you have more in common and also you’re not competing with each other – you’re helping each other out. At Columbia it’s a very competitive environment, I mean people you met there, I met a lot of veterans, and the deciding factor that moved me from going to Davis or San Diego was the veteran support network and I really enjoy presence of other veterans because we speak the same language and we support each other and we also understand that we’re not that 22-year old college kids that just you know that was just legal to drink, so for us, we don’t care about the things that typical college students do and we try to help each other out in terms of academic study together, try to work out some of those mathematical models and things of that nature.

*You finish Columbia. What was your major?*

I double majored in Economics and Political Science. The classes at City College lay a good foundation, but it’s a different kind of economics. The classes can be broken into quantitative or liberal or classical. So, in City College, it’s more the liberal art that talk about that theoretical principles and at Columbia, it’s more quant and math-driven compare to the economics classes at City College.

*What could City College do better?*

Pause. Honestly, I don’t know at this point, but I would say definitely have some common first year classes for every student. You can say it’s a waste of time or whatever, but I think it is important for students to understand that they’re not alone. You can transfer things. Trust me, if you have question on a particular topic, more than likely other students will have the same questions too. It’s one of those things that common core that brings students together because it’s a commuter school and people don’t want to waste any time. I understand that people would say it’s a waste of time if I am not transferring toward a technical certificate – why should I waste time? But I think that – what that doesn’t address is that other aspect of the student, just being part of the student body. Not just get in, get what you want and get out. I understand that – if we can have something like that, it would be great. And instead of making it a traditional class, make it like a go or no go. If you want to transfer or get an associate’s degree, you have to take a class in some sort of organization building or something that makes you get out of your own shell – that’s the bottomline. Force students to get out of their own comfort zone. That’s what college is all about its not just studying but to push yourself out of your own comfort zone, but explore to learn not just knowledge, but who you are and what you want to do in life.

*How did you learn about the resources at CCSF?*

There’s a mandatory orientation for the matriculation process – I did it my first time around, but the second time around, I didn’t have to do it. When you have thousands of students, they just want to push you through and you only have 30 minutes with that … I mean it’s a long time, but when you are trying to figure out what you’ll do for your next two years and possibly the next four – it’s not enough. You feel like you’re being rushed and you have to know the right questions, and if you don’t know the right questions, how do you even know what to ask or who to ask.

*Was the world your oyster after graduating from Columbia? Was it the golden ticket?*

I definitely thought it would make my job search easier as a Columbia grad, but it was 2012, and for those that don’t remember that the economy was in the shitter and the job market was absolutely terrible. Nowadays, in order to get a good job, you have to get a good internship. The internship was competitive was competitive and it was brutal in the 2010 timeframe because the economy was in the shitter. Now you have masters graduates trying to do a bachelor degree holder’s job and you push the whole thing back – and now you have college grads trying to do internship work. As a City College student, it was difficult back then to get an internship. Absolutely terrible. But now, especially coming back from the East Coast with the name Columbia got me more interviews that I otherwise -- but what you do from there is otherwise up to you.

*How did you choose Factset and what is your role?*

So, let me back up. Factset acquired my old company, so I came along with the team from the old company. I am an ETF analyst. An Exchange Traded Fund is like a mutual fund with different features, some subtle, some legal that makes it, we believe more efficient, cheaper, more liquid. The next step of evolution like mutual fund 2.0 – so we analyze data, performance, trends in the industry, like the ETF industry, which is close to $3 trillion in assets and it’s growing exponentially, so yeah, that’s what me and my team do.

*Where do you see yourself in five years? Finance, entrepreneurial, Bay Area?*

It would be a lie if I said I see myself taking the CFA, getting a pay raise, etc. I just came back from a deployment so I am taking the next couple of months just being carefree for the net couple of months. I am not going to stress myself out just yet. My deployment was 9 months, and prior to that, I was at another 3-4 month training and I was gone for another 3-4 months give or take.

Deployment is one of those things where you don’t have the opportunity or time to think about it when you’re doing it, but when you come back, the first few weeks you take them just to unwind, but now most people will start to think about what exactly happened at deployment and what did you gain or lose from the deployment and that just kind of start happening because the first couple of weeks is like a honeymoon – you don’t have to do anything – you have the weekends and you don’t have to sleep in tents anymore and you sleep in your own bed. It was a honeymoon, but after a while things start to come back and you start to think about what if something did happen over there and think about whether you are still the same person.

*My last question. You came back to City College in 2008 and you went on to Columbia and began your career, you’ve been deployed. When you reflect back on your time at City College, how do you think that experience has shaped you to be the person that you are today?*

That’s actually a very good question. I didn’t really connect the dots that far back. But I would definitely say it’s more so City College as an institution, but I think it is the community as a friendship and it is competitive when you think about wanting to go to Berkeley or Haas or whatever school, but actually, compared to four-year schools, it is actually a very laid back environment. Most classes don’t grade on a curve – you score the points, you get an A, you get a B. So, there is enough to go around for everyone, so you end up making friends that’s not…. You want to be friends with. It’s not like you want to pick that person’s brain and get better at this. You end up just making friends and I think that friendship and support network is that really sort of what kind of gave me the confidence.

My narrative is geared more toward the immigrant, Asian American students. Do what makes you happy. So, what I am about to say is really more toward the Chinese American or immigrant student population. Do what makes you happy. If fulfilling your parents’ expectation makes you happy, great. But at the end of the day, your parents aren’t going to be there with you for your entire life, and to me, it would be an injustice if you wake up one night when you’re 40 or 50 years old and you look back you say, “Gosh, I wanted to do that so bad, but I couldn’t because of my parents, because of the expectation.” And that is actually putting the blame on them, but if you’re happy, fine, but to me, do what makes you happy, and of course, not breaking the laws or anything illegal, but in a reasonable, do what makes you happy – when you’re happy and you enjoy doing it, money will follow. You naturally get good at it, and when you get good at it, you get promotion, and the money will come. You don’t have to be.. I need to go to Haas and go to an investment bank and make six figures right off the bat and endure that 12-hours brutal work schedule everyday and getting shit on every day because that’s what my parents…. No, no. This is America. There are plenty of opportunities and all you have to do is take a step back, free yourself and look.