

# Students: An Introduction

By Brett Nachman and Michelle Holowach

**H**ow to take the pulse of higher education? If professors, administrators and staff, plus boards, committees, alumni, donors and boosters, provide the heartbeat of the academy, students supply the lifeblood. Last spring, *Phi Kappa Phi Forum* conducted Q&As with the last constituency at virtually every level: freshman, sophomore, junior, senior, master's, and doctoral. Profiles span public and private schools, and big and small campuses, throughout the country. Interviewees, some Society members and others not, range across demographics and majors.

The representatives wind up distinct. They vary in interests, backgrounds, and personalities. Pupils also differ in extracurriculars, volunteerism, residence (on-campus or off-), and whether or not they have a job beyond what being in academia entails.

Yet several unifying themes emerge. The learners are ambitious, hardworking, and thoughtful. And they relish interaction with instructors. Financial costs prove their main concern. Another issue: time management.

Q&As occurred by email and phone. Edited excerpts follow.

— Editor Peter Szatmary



## Kenny Boyer

University of Kansas  
Freshman

**MAJOR:** Economics

**SPORTS:** Discus and shot put

*Kenny Boyer's commitment to balancing education and sports keeps him on track, literally and figuratively.*

For observations about higher education from provosts, see page 36.

**Q: What's the No. 1 issue for college students?**

**A:** The expense, he said. Boyer's parents and scholarships underwrite his education. Many of Boyer's high school friends "went to community college just because of the burden of the cost."

**Q: Why did you choose KU?**

**A:** It has "the best track-and-field coach, so it was kind of a no-brainer," he said. And the campus boasts "the prettiest views you will ever see."

**Q: What sparked your interest in track and field?**

**A:** "I started it (at age five) and I stuck with it," he said. Boyer initially was a sprinter because he was small and ran for seven years; when he physically developed, Boyer, now standing 6 feet 2 inches, shifted to throwing.

**Q: What do you enjoy most about college sports?**

**A:** The competition, he said. "Everyone's good. It makes it a lot more fun when you are not beating everyone almost every time" as in high school. "I felt like in high school I was stalling out, just because sometimes I would compete against myself. But now I want to throw farther and farther, because other people have thrown farther than me."

**Q: What's your biggest college challenge?**

**A:** "You have to manage your athletics at the same time while managing your academics, and sometimes that's really overwhelming," he said. Boyer takes 15 class hours per semester (all in person), spends about 20 hours per week training, and lives in a campus apartment like most student-athletes. He competes most weeks in the spring, meaning studying on the road. "I just have to hold my academics at the same level that I hold my athletics."

**Q: How has college matured you?**

**A:** "I have learned to manage my time a lot better," he said. "In high school, I was all over the place. In college, you cannot float by." KU requires traveling athletes to participate in study hall, and Boyer makes the most of it, he said. "Staying focused in college is probably going to be any kid's biggest success, because there are so many distractions and there are so many ways you can go wrong."

**Q: Favorite college experience?**

**A:** The "awesome" high-tech athletic facilities, he said. "You honestly feel like a pro when you are practicing."

**Q: Most valuable college experience?**

**A:** "My classes. Because that's what I'm going to take with me for the rest of my life."

**Q: What do you hope to get from KU ultimately?**

**A:** "A degree," he said. "That's the most you can really wish for." Boyer also wants college to "teach me what life is going to be like."



## Emma Petersen

Indiana University-Purdue  
University Fort Wayne  
Sophomore

**MAJOR:** Communication disorders

*Emma Petersen values straight talk in any number of ways.*

**Q: How did you pick your school?**

**A:** "It really came down to cost," she said. "Because my mom works at IPFW [as psychology department secretary], I had a guaranteed discount." And the sophomore lives at home (with her mother; father, a Missouri-Synod Lutheran pastor; and younger brother, a high school senior) — so no room and board. "I've been really happy here, actually," added Petersen, who works as a barista at a local Starbucks and has a partial scholarship.

**Q: What's the No. 1 issue students face in higher education?**

**A:** “Does having to pay for it count?” she said with a laugh. “It’s definitely a problem with how expensive it has become and the loans that really need to be taken out to go to school. It used to be possible where you could work and pay for it, but it’s not so possible anymore.”

**Q: What’s your biggest college success?**

**A:** “Being able to balance work and school,” she said. For instance, last fall, Petersen worked 35 hours each week on top of being a full-time student.

**Q: Your biggest college obstacle?**

**A:** “When I first started at IPFW, I was a little nervous about the student body, actually,” she said: “that I would be surrounded by people who weren’t really motivated.” But in most cases, that has not been true, Petersen countered. Plus, “Once you get into the higher level classes, or you can get into your classes for your major, it tends to be people who are more into what you are learning and who care a little bit more.”

**Q: Favorite college experience?**

**A:** “Can I say, ‘Talking with my professors?’” she asked. “I just think that they’re really cool and I like to talk with them.” Petersen continued, “I like to be around these brilliant people and I am so lucky to be able to talk to them. They have published works that are so interesting and important.” And these admired educators “read my stuff.”

**Q: What’s the biggest misconception about college?**

**A:** Some professors “are researchers and not really teachers,” and their classes end up “just PowerPoint slides,” she said. Still, Petersen observed, “Nobody should expect them to all be like *Dead Poets Society* teachers.”

**Q: How did you focus on communication disorders?**

**A:** “My best friend’s cousin was studying it, and I thought it was really interesting,” she recalled. Petersen has long found language similarly appealing, she said.

**Q: How has college matured you?**

**A:** “I think I was forced into working harder and managing my time better,” she said. “I have become interested in more things, too,” including minoring in linguistics and exploring German further.



**Ivón Padilla-Rodríguez**  
University of Nevada, Reno  
Junior

**MAJORS:** History and philosophy (ethics, law, and politics) in the honors program  
**PHI KAPPA PHI CHAPTER:** UNR  
**SOCIETY AWARD:** 2013 Study

Abroad Consortium, taking courses about Latin American social mobility, and volunteering at

an orphanage in Puntarenas, Costa Rica

**OTHER AWARDS:** 2014 Truman Scholarship for academics, leadership and civics, worth up to \$30,000 for graduate study; 2014 Top Ten College Women, May issue of *Glamour* magazine

*The much-lauded young scholar overcomes humble beginnings.*

**Q: You experienced a tough childhood. Did you think college was an option?**

**A:** No. I grew up in Los Angeles really poor. I went to high school in Las Vegas. My parents are Mexican immigrants. My mom didn’t finish high school. My dad didn’t finish middle school. We moved in part because they had heard there was an economic boom, but they still struggled to find employment. I experienced homelessness for three months in 11<sup>th</sup> grade. My parents, divorced now, were separated then, and my mom and I had to stay with friends. (My little brother and little sister live with our dad.) My parents don’t understand the U.S. education system, particularly higher education. They thought they would have had to pay for it for me. My mom said I could finish high school, but because we had a hard time putting food on the table, she also wanted me to get a job; so it would have been OK with her if I had dropped out. But now that my mom has seen all that I have accomplished, she has a greater appreciation for higher education.

**Q: You won one of the grand prizes at the 2011 Dr Pepper Tuition Giveaway by tossing the most footballs through a two-foot hole in an oversized can during halftime of the SEC championship game at the Georgia Dome. You only learned to throw a few days before, coached by UNR’s starting quarterback. You earned \$100,000 for college.**

**A:** Around 10,000 applicants submitted one-minute videos about themselves. I explained how I didn’t start drinking soda until I was 13 since in my home soda was a luxury and how I wanted to go to law school to help underprivileged children and the Latino community. I made the cut and was one of five to win the football toss. I was a first-semester freshman at UNR and money was getting tight. I tell Dr Pepper all the time that they saved my life, essentially.

**Q: Summarize your community outreach.**

**A:** I work on immigration reform through UNR’s Latino Research Center and its Latino Student Advisory Board, for which I’m executive director. We assist low-income and undocumented Latinos. I lobbied on behalf of them at the state and federal levels and helped establish a scholarship-mentoring program for potential first-generation college students. I also am a legislative affairs intern at Mi Familia Vota, which promotes social and economic justice for Latinos through civic participation.

The other half of my service is in theater. It’s been a safe haven for me, allowing creative expression and decision-making. I cofounded Spotlight: Academy for Young Actors, offering

free classes to low-income kids age 7 to 12 in Reno, Costa Rica, Chile, Cuba, and Mexico.



**Hsin-Ta (Andre) Tsai**  
Berea College  
Senior

**MAJORS:** Economics (international politics and policy) and education studies

**SOCIETY AWARD:** 2013 Study Abroad Grant, summer term at Exeter College, University of Oxford

*Diligence and appreciation form the backbone of this striver.*

**Q: How did you pick your majors?**

**A:** I grew up in Taichung City, Taiwan. I lost my dad when I was 8. My mom didn’t finish primary school. So it was rough. She and I sought assistance from the government, organizations, and people, but no luck. I thought: I should fix this problem for me and for others like me. That’s what brought me here, on full scholarship. Everyone accepted at Berea can be on a full 4-year tuition scholarship (with a required part-time labor position). I also receive room and board funding. We thought I would not be able to go to college! I want to help those with similar experiences.

**Q: How involved is your family with your schooling?**

**A:** I’ve done it all on my own. I have an older brother and an older sister. They and my mom are supportive emotionally and were excited for and proud of me when I got accepted. Since we lived in poverty, they kept wondering how the education would be paid for and were skeptical that it was free, even during summers.

**Q: What do you do in your free time?**

**A:** Well, I will soon complete two majors in three years while having two part-time jobs: teaching assistant in economics and office associate/web content assistant in the labor and student life office. I cofounded the Berea Economics Association. I am treasurer of the Asian Student Union. I’m chapter vice president of Students for a Free Tibet and of Omicron Delta Epsilon, the international economics honor society. And I’m in several other honor societies. So if I have free time, I nap. But normally, I don’t have any.

**Q: Do you have any hobbies?**

**A:** This is going to sound nerdy, but I like to read for my research.

**Q: What academic obstacles have you faced?**

**A:** When I first came here, I struggled to make the cultural adjustment. Then, because I was really busy, I had difficulties with time management. Now, carving out some fun is an issue. But I’m not a big social person. I don’t go to parties.

**Q: How has college helped you grow?**

**A:** In the U.S., the first two years are about

exploration. So I changed majors five times! In Taiwan, when you apply for college, you must pick your major right then. And the bond between teacher and student here is unheard-of in my country.

**Q: What will you do after you graduate?**

**A:** Pursue a master's degree in comparative and international education at St. Cross College, University of Oxford. I wasn't sure I could pay for it but I have secured the necessary resources! One-third comes from a noninterest loan from an asset management firm at which I interned, one-third from a noninterest loan from my high school English teacher, and one-third from a low-interest loan from the Taiwanese government.

**Q: What's your long-term goal?**

**A:** To conduct educational research and analyze educational policy in Taiwan or at an international nonprofit organization.



**Ariel Mitchell**

New York University  
First-year M.F.A. student in musical theater writing  
**UNDERGRADUATE SCHOOL:** Brigham Young University  
**MAJOR:** Playwriting  
**PHI KAPPA PHI CHAPTER:** BYU  
**SOCIETY AWARD:** 2013 Ruth E. Brasher Fellowship

*Ariel Mitchell intends to take center stage. She wrote an award-winning play as an undergraduate. Now in graduate school, Mitchell studies her craft under leading lights.*

**Q: How did you become interested in musical theater writing?**

**A:** "I have kind of always been obsessed with theater," she said. Raised on staples like *The Music Man*, she started writing for the stage after realizing that acting was not the best fit, "and so it just kind of became this love I kept pursuing."

**Q: Why NYU for graduate school?**

**A:** "It's really the only program of its kind to really focus on musical theater. It's also very unique because you apply as a composer or [like Mitchell] as a words-person," she said. "And you spend the whole first year collaborating" on assignments such as song types, various scenes, and one-act musicals, under noteworthy instructors including William Finn (the Tony Award-winning *Falsettos* and the Tony-nominated *The 25<sup>th</sup> Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*) and Mindi Dickstein (*Little Women: The Musical*).

**Q: What's your biggest success?**

**A:** "I had my play produced at BYU, and it won the Harold and Mimi Steinberg National Student Playwriting Award for 2013," she explained, through the Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival. Inspired by a *New York Times* article, Mitchell's *A Second Birth* follows Nasima/Nasim, a female raised male by her poor Afghani parents to help the family's standing in their

patriarchal village, as she transitions back to her born gender when of age to marry. She enjoyed "creating something out of nothing" and seeing "that realized onstage," with the company "contributing to what's been in your own head for so long" and getting "excited about what you're exploring and questioning."

**Q: What challenges do you face?**

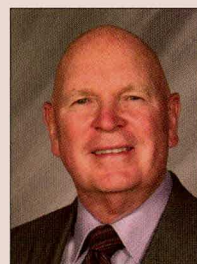
**A:** "I think my biggest problem is believing in myself and in my work. And it's hard in art to put so much into something that sometimes can seem like it's not going anywhere or it's not giving anything more to the world."

**Q: You went directly to graduate school after undergrad.**

**A:** "I wanted to kind of continue this trajectory and finish my schooling all at once. I knew that I wanted a graduate degree so I'd have the option of teaching," a "safety net as a writer."

**Q: How is your education equipping you to stand out?**

**A:** "Standing out is connections and knowing people, having people mention your work," she said. Training also builds self-confidence, Mitchell added. And the singularity of the NYU M.F.A. might allow her to "take that to other schools and create similar programs" — distinguishing her from job applicants.



**Philip Pearson**

University of Southern Mississippi  
Doctoral candidate in educational leadership  
**DEGREES:** B.A., urban studies, University of Nebraska Omaha; M.S., teacher education, University of Southern California; M.S., educational administration, University of Oklahoma. All earned at U.S. military education centers in Germany.  
**PHI KAPPA PHI CHAPTER:** Southern Miss

*A former soldier and onetime teacher pursues a dream.*

**Q: Why enroll in a doctoral program at this stage of your life?**

**A:** I started three days after I retired. I had wanted to work on a Ph.D. for years, but my military and teaching careers didn't allow adequate time.

**Q: How has your background influenced your doctoral studies?**

**A:** I was drafted in 1968, spending five years on active duty in the Army, including a tour in Vietnam and two tours in Germany. I was in the Army Reserve from 1973 to 1999, mostly in Germany, in the engineering, transportation, and aviation branches. In 1990 my unit was activated, and I served in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Iraq for Operation Desert Storm. I retired as a colonel. I was also a teacher for 29 years, mostly middle and high school science and math: from 1976 to 1982 in Livermore, Calif., and from 1982 to 2005 at four locations in Germany with the

Department of Defense Dependents Schools. It is interesting to compare military and educational leadership. Some nonmilitary people mistakenly believe that military commanders have absolute power over their units. Actually, the best military commanders are good at developing a spirit of togetherness and a sense of teamwork. Similarly, school administrators, classroom teachers, and students themselves need to stress togetherness and teamwork.

**Q: What do you like best about your doctoral studies?**

**A:** Working at an advanced educational level. Learning new skills. Developing a synergetic appreciation for material in three different curricular areas: educational leadership, statistics, and higher education administration. And getting to know some excellent students and outstanding professors.

**Q: What obstacles have you faced?**

**A:** Readjusting to being out of Europe and back in the U.S. I wish professors had more time to work with students on research questions and publishing opportunities. And because I have enjoyed nearly all of my classes, it has been hard to stop taking them and start working on my dissertation. My topic: seeing if school climate is related to dropout rates in Mississippi public high schools.

**Q: What's the No. 1 issue in higher education?**

**A:** Cost. But I'm fortunate to qualify for scholarships that defray most of my tuition. I take care of living expenses. Economic pressure appears to have reduced the number of students seeking a liberal arts education. There are many, many positions that need educated people, not trained people. The liberal arts education is designed to educate. It's sad if fewer students enroll in and complete a liberal arts degree because of spiraling costs. ●



**Brett Nachman** (Arizona State University chapter student vice president and Council of Students West Regional Representative) is a senior journalism major at the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at ASU. He also attends Barrett, The Honors College on campus and founded the Barrett SWAT Team, which mentors incoming honors transfer students. Nachman is a columnist for the entertainment site *geeksofdoom.com*. He served on the editorial board of the school literary magazine, *Write On, Downtown*, and earned the junior and senior outstanding scholarship awards from ASU's Society chapter. Email him at [bnachman@asu.edu](mailto:bnachman@asu.edu) or follow him on Twitter @bnachmanreports.



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