

Back to school at nearly 60

By Michael R. Costa (née Costagliola) '80

I never imagined when I graduated from Colgate in 1980 that one day — more than 40 years after I first drove through the Chenango Valley — I would return to college. This time, the campus would be in Silicon Valley, and I would be nearly 60 years old. The climate was different, but so much of the yearlong experience I recently completed at Stanford University was as fulfilling intellectually and socially as that first year at Colgate. And, Colgate connections happened there on a regular basis.

At Stanford, I was one of 25 Distinguished Careers Institute (DCI) Fellows. The other fellows jokingly described it as “A gap year for adults.” The Stanford DCI program is for individuals from all walks of life who seek to transform themselves for roles with social impact at the local, national, and global levels. We spent a year in residency at Stanford to pursue academic interests, engage in intergenerational learning, and chart the next chapter in our life journey. The program’s logic is simple: We are living longer lives and have a passion in contributing beyond the traditional retirement age.

I had spent nearly 25 years as an investment banker and was looking to pivot and perhaps do something more socially impactful. Having lived, been educated, and worked in a geographic area limited to 40°-42° latitude and 71°-75° longitude (the metropolitan New York area, Hamilton, NY, and Boston, Mass.), I wanted to be immersed in the “disruptive technology” culture of Silicon Valley and witness its impact on industries in which I am involved: media and post-secondary higher education. My post-investment banking career includes serving on the boards of directors at Scripps Networks (a media company best known for The Food Network and HGTV) and Dean College, a small, private college outside of Boston.

I started investigating the Stanford program and discovered that Patricia J. Gumpert '80, who was in my first-year seminar at Colgate, was a DCI faculty adviser. I had lost touch with her, but Paula Rooney, who is Dean’s current president and was coincidentally the dean of freshman at Colgate during my student years, had not. She reached out to Dr. Gumpert to gauge whether DCI would be a good fit for me and vice versa. Soon, I found myself applying for the program, and I was eventually admitted as a 2017 fellow.

Much like Colgate’s orientation week many years ago, the DCI Fellows came together for an orientation in fall 2016 before we kicked off the program in January 2017. We were a diverse group, including a tax judge from London born in Trinidad;



Costa (left) studies with a classmate at Stanford University.

a serial entrepreneur from Sri Lanka living outside Boston; and, of course, another Colgate alumnus, Elliot Slade '76, who is a hedge fund managing partner. During the orientation, former Secretary of Commerce Penny Pritzker spoke about her “Life Journey.” If this were an indication of what was to come, I couldn’t wait for January.

But before then, I had my first challenge: registering for courses online at the stroke of midnight (3 a.m. New York time), competing against thousands of Stanford

students who had probably written algorithms to automate the process while they slept. I muddled through and ended up with a course load that reflected being in the heart of Silicon Valley, including Venture Capital at the Graduate School of Business, The Future of Finance (where I would learn what bitcoin was, but unfortunately, not invest), and Entrepreneurial Approaches to Educational Reform. Those courses would be supplemented by twice-weekly DCI seminars, one covering the life journeys of each of the fellows and a luncheon dialogue with Stanford professors.

In early January 2017, my wife, Pegeen, and I moved to Palo Alto for a year. Between the course load, the DCI seminars, and all the other speakers/events at Stanford, I was drinking from a fire hose. The quarter raced by. I somehow kept up and enjoyed social events with my DCI fellows. One dinner included an interview with George Shultz, former secretary of Treasury and State, among other cabinet posts. At nearly 97, Secretary Shultz was the epitome of leading a purposeful life well after normal retirement age.

Mid-March brought breakfast with Colgate President Brian Casey (hosted by Dan Rosensweig P'15,'17, CEO of Chegg) and a critical mass of Colgate folks in the heart of Silicon Valley. President Casey and I chatted, and I found another Colgate-Stanford connection. Not only had he attended Stanford Law School, but he also helped coach the women’s swim team.

“Sitting with another DCI fellow among a sea of millennials being taught rock and roll as if it were history may have been one of the year’s academic highlights.”

The second quarter kicked in and I revisited those important Colgate liberal arts roots. I enrolled in a history course titled Dante’s World: A Medieval and Renaissance Journey and a music course titled Rock, Sex, and Rebellion. Sitting with another DCI fellow among a sea of millennials being taught rock and roll as if it were history may have been one of the year’s academic highlights.

Sprinkled throughout the year were sessions tailored for the DCI fellows. One remarkable session centered on longevity. Another, titled Designing Your Life, was led by a former Apple executive who took us through a three-hour sprint of exercises to tease out where you might go next and how to get there. An afternoon Contemplation Workshop by three former/current Stanford deans of religious life was followed by an instructor-led meditation session.

We had been told the year would go by quickly. After a summer back in New York (taking a couple of Stanford online courses to keep the academic momentum going), we returned to Palo Alto for the final quarter. Now it was time to figure out what I would do after the program ended in December. Two things crystallized. Through one seminar, I met the folks at The Brown Institute, a collaboration between The Columbia School of Journalism and The School of Engineering at Stanford that supports new endeavors in media innovation. Going forward, I will be exploring working with the institute as it seeks to help students demonstrate the viability of the innovative media products they create.

Also, although I was not expecting to get bit by the entrepreneurial bug, I was. Along with three other DCI fellows, I took an intensive, hands-on course called the Startup Garage, in which students design and test new business concepts that address real-world needs. We focused on the difficulty nontraditional entrepreneurs have in being matched with resources to make their start-ups successful. Through human curation and artificial intelligence, we formed a venture that hopes to continue to disrupt the legacy Silicon Valley model of a small group of venture capitalists determining which entrepreneurs receive the lion’s share of capital. It’s not a company yet, and it may well turn out that its most effective form will be as a social venture.

Looking back on the year, if either of these projects takes hold, that will be icing on the cake. For me, the DCI program led, as promised, to a new sense of purpose — if not purposes — and a new community/network. All of that was enhanced by the Colgate connections that popped up during the yearlong journey.