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Beyond Access to Success

Pamela K. Gardner

Reflection is a cornerstone to developing ethical, effective, learning-focused professionals and a favorite topic of mine. Being invited to share my thoughts in *The Vermont Connection* is a real honor. Because this year's theme is about access, this essay focuses on transforming students' experiences by normalizing not knowing and the ways power and privilege can play out in students' transitions out of college.

Yesterday I worked with a group of first-semester students with identities or histories that have been correlated with dropping out of college. They are all enrolled in a course that strengthens study skills, critical thinking, listening, decision-making, resilience, and career and multicultural competence.

Often we think of educational access as the chance to enter the academy. These students had passed that milestone and sat before me with varying degrees of earnest optimism and trepidation, either because or in spite of their circumstances. Having arrived at my own undergraduate institution from a large lower-income Latino family, with parents who hadn't attended college, and from a state ranked 49th in education, I felt some kinship with these students. By age 18 I was already aware that the odds were against someone like me, but I never doubted that I would graduate from college. My early education gave me some reason to believe I could, but like many first-generation or low-income students, my post-baccalaureate vision was long on dreams and short on strategies. Career choice just seemed like magic to me.

Though I had a history of academic success, college was a shock. Surrounded by people who had been leaders and academic all-stars, I felt dwarfed. While my classmates found our introductory science course remedial, I studied relentlessly to keep pace with the rapid-fire presentation of new material. I was convinced I was the only student who had never heard of Friedrich Nietzsche or Samuel Johnson. Everyone seemed to know more than I did.

Pamela K. Gardner earned her bachelor's degree from the University of South Carolina, and both her master's and doctoral degrees—in Student Affairs and Leadership, respectively—from the University of Vermont. She currently serves as UVM's Director of Career Services where she supports students as they imagine, explore and pursue the best work for them. Passionate about improvement and growth, her interests include using narratives in career counseling and professional development, removing barriers for students' marginalized identities, engaging with her partner and children, and living with gratitude and joy.

Enrolling as “undecided,” I was sent to the Center for Undeclared Majors. Each semester the same kind and optimistic faculty member would ask if I’d decided on a major. When I hadn’t, he would give me the same assignment. “Go,” he would say, “and talk to the chairs of interesting departments.” Each semester I’d ask if it was really okay to do that. Each time he’d say, “Of course!” and send me on my way.

Honestly, I had no clue how to proceed. Would I call up and say, “Hi, I’m undecided but I might want this major?” Then what? Crickets? I pictured myself slack-jawed and tongue-tied, instantly revealing that I was clueless and really didn’t belong. Though I tended to be compulsive about following instructions, I never completed this assignment. Each semester I’d show up, guilty and scared, waiting to be discovered. Not once did this advisor remember us having this exact conversation before. After four semesters of this, he had me choose among the three disciplines wherein I’d racked up the most credits. Even then I declared double majors because I couldn’t decide between my two favorites.

The fact is that I lacked confidence and what Pierre Bourdieu calls “cultural capital”—assets like cultural knowledge and habits of speech that provide entry into professional settings (Swartz, 1991). I simply didn’t know how college worked. What felt natural for my advisor seemed insurmountable to me. Not once did he ask whether I could picture myself making the calls or suggest questions I might pose in those meetings. He never asked what classes I was enjoying or suggested I read each major’s course descriptions and note my interests.

Though I didn’t realize it then, this caring man’s unwillingness to address my indecisiveness only served to further undermine my confidence. By assuming I understood the way things worked, or that I could just decide, he reinforced my fear that I was an imposter. His silence told me that not knowing was to be hidden, and by implication, was shameful.

Shame brought on paralyzing fear that kept me from seeking expert advice. I faked it, following my gut or relying on peers. Luckily, I stumbled into great majors, became involved, met student leaders, and eventually learned about navigating college. Through campus leadership, I found belonging and regained my joy at being in an educational setting. It is no accident that I became interested in student affairs, as it is why I succeeded. With lots of mentoring, openness, and encouragement, I transitioned relatively easily into my life’s work as a career counselor.

So what does all of this have to do with last night’s class? The course’s text covered the major and career clarification process so thoroughly that I found

it intimidating. My intent as I walked into class was to normalize the feelings people experience as they choose majors and implement career ideas.

At the instructor's request, I told a bit of my story. We then asked students to assemble according to how decided or undecided they were about majors, and then careers. In these human continuums, they did the teaching. They shared how they had arrived in this state of decision or indecision, reflected on parallels in each other's stories, discussed how their classmates had attained more clarity (active exploration, reflection, more exploration), and identified what had made them change their minds. They noted that realizing you dislike something is information. Knowing why makes that information useful and applicable in other situations.

Perhaps more importantly, they realized that while it's okay to be undecided, you can't live there. To decide, one must explore internal and external territory, and reflect on how new information changes perspectives and provides focus. Yes, it's great to set your sights on a goal and pursue it doggedly, but not to ignore information that could affect your capacity to manifest that goal. They were amazing.

By 9:00 this morning three students had emailed me. They talked about what a relief it was to know that they weren't alone, that others struggled, and that they could see a way through the mire. Each planned to take some independent action and/or connect with mentors, advisors, or the staff of our career center. These messages made me consider how much more we must do.

Making decisions about majors, exploring career ideas, and setting goals all require self-awareness and some knowledge of the work world, in addition to skills in analysis, reflection, and decision-making. They require what we used to call maturity — a sense of agency and personal responsibility. All of these developmental tasks are familiar to student affairs professionals. We acknowledge the additional social/cultural, campus, and home-related stresses faced by traditionally underrepresented students. What we sometimes overlook are the huge hurdles related to implementing career decisions. The students in that class were only beginning their journey. There are many obstacles ahead.

Lower income students frequently work while taking classes, often at jobs they held in high school — grocery stockers and cashiers, lifeguards, retail clerks, and the like — without regard to career interest. Few can afford the unpaid internships so often required to credential oneself in a career. Internships offer access and the opportunity to build cultural capital. They are immersive opportunities where students build skills, experiment with cultural fit, and learn the structures and jargon of their fields. They develop contacts, job-related

skills, and understand field-based concepts. All of these factors contribute to higher degrees of confidence, competence, and credentials needed to become a professional.

Job searching is highly ritualized, demanding context-dependent written, verbal, and non-verbal communication skills. Much of this information is race or class-based, gender-normed, defined by narrow boundaries of ability, and fraught with assumptions and “-isms.” It is coded in ways that, much like choosing a major was for me, are a mystery to students like those in my class. The amount of detail that must be absorbed and fluidly accessed to become a successful job candidate, especially in 2011’s employment market, is staggering.

Student affairs professionals can do something about these problems. We can advocate for courses like the one I visited, integrate career and personal development into our student leader training, and teach networking and etiquette in our programming. Work-study jobs can become internship-quality opportunities, and we can encourage supervisors to become mentors, teaching students the norms, language, and skills that will increase their access to opportunity. We can advocate for funding unpaid internships and recruit alumni/ae mentors with a wide range of identities who have achieved success. We career counselors can advocate with employers and run programs, but to succeed we must mobilize our campuses to promote accessible educational opportunities and social justice. It is time for new and creative thinking to ensure the brilliance of the next generation is not dimmed by acceptance of the status quo. We need you. Students need you. What more will you do?

References

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