

The Vermont Connection

Volume 32 *Critical Truths, Empowered Voices,
Changing the Landscape of Higher Education*

Article 12

January 2011

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Recommended Citation

Flash, Lacretia Johnson (2011) "Embracing the Artist and Discovering the Scholar Practitioner," *The Vermont Connection*: Vol. 32 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc/vol32/iss1/12>

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REFLECTIONS

As members of the UVM HESA community, past and present, we acknowledge the value in listening to one another's stories. To commemorate the 31st anniversary of *The Vermont Connection*, authors were invited to reflect on meaning-making and lessons learned from higher education and student affairs, the HESA program, and the community that unites us. We hope that you will enjoy these reflections as they chronicle the continuing journeys through HESA's past, present, and future.

Embracing the Artist and Discovering the Scholar Practitioner

Lacretia Johnson Flash

Remembering Your Essence

For more than a decade, my sensibility as an artist and my approach as a student affairs professional in higher education have been deeply interwoven. Through both roles, I am able to find the space in which to create and discover new ways of bringing together disparate elements into a cohesive and elegant whole. The work of the artist is to take an idea or vision and to turn that vision into something that can be seen and experienced. For the artist, this is done with art materials, tools, skills, an ability to conceptualize something new, and a willingness to take risks. I believe that this approach as an artist is also infused in my practice as an administrator. Though the materials and tools of the artist and administrator are very different, I have found that the spirit and joy underlying both sides of myself are the same.

My sensitivity to the arts was planted and nurtured during my early childhood. As a child I would spend hours cutting, coloring, and pasting the paper scraps from an old dress box that belonged to my mom. I loved taking whatever materials I could find (e.g., paper scraps, bits of cloth, pieces of yarn, beads, and crayons) to see what I could make. Hours of creating could pass without me noticing. Sometimes the result was a collage or a picture. Sometimes it was just a mess. No matter what came of my creative efforts (as a child and now as an adult), I experience great joy in the process of creating and experimenting with color, texture, and form. This joy has followed me throughout my childhood, college years, graduate school, and even more so now as an administrator.

Dr. Lacretia Johnson Flash is the Assistant Dean for Conduct, Policy, and Climate in the Division of Student and Campus Life at the University of Vermont. Lacretia earned her doctorate in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies from the University of Vermont. From the University of Maryland at College Park, she earned degrees in College Student Personnel and in English Literature. In addition to her career in higher education, Lacretia has also served as an Artist-in-Residence with the Studio G program at Georgetown University Medical Center and Art is the Heart.

This reflection was written with excerpts taken from "The Artist and the Administrator" - Lacretia's admissions essay for the University of Vermont Educational Leadership and Policy Studies doctoral program

I believe that the situations that challenge me the most intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally often give the most satisfaction upon resolution. I try to embrace the process of working through difficult problems under demanding constraints (e.g., time, resources, policies, and other parameters). Though in the immediate moment I may feel stuck, frustrated, perplexed, or overwhelmed, ultimately I am able to find my way through these moments by embracing the spirit and process of the artist.

The Art of Being a Practitioner

As I move through professional work challenges, I use many of the same principles and processes that I use as an artist. Instead of working with a set of artists' tools, I work with teams of staff and students. Instead of using paper, paint, beads, and fiber, I draw on my experiences and knowledge. Rather than a frame or canvas on which my art is contained, I work within a framework of political, organizational, social, and economic contexts. Instead of using an aesthetic vision as my guide, I move forward with a sense of personal and institutional values, mission, and purpose. And rather than creating a sculptural piece or collage, my products are programs, interventions, policies, or new approaches to my work.

I believe that being a practitioner or administrator in higher education is profoundly creative and deeply satisfying work. In moments of great stress and high-stakes decisions, remembering my essence as an artist has helped keep me grounded, centered, and productive.

The Necessity of Naïveté

I have been a full-time higher education professional for more than a decade. My early professional career in higher education focused on service-learning and community service in both the academic affairs and student affairs contexts. I now serve as the Assistant Dean for Conduct, Policy, and Climate at the University of Vermont.

I look back on my early years as a master's student and young professional with humility. I entered into my graduate program with great hopes, intentions, and a deep willingness to learn. My master's education was essential in helping me to acquire the knowledge and skills on which to anchor my professional practice. Through my years of working in higher education, I am constantly building upon a rich repertoire of experiences that test my knowledge and skills. As I have moved through my career, I have come to see the work of higher education as much more complicated, challenging, and yes, even rewarding than I did a decade ago.

One of my earliest memories as a graduate student was sitting in Marylu McEwen's Student Development Theory class at the University of Maryland. After reading about a particular student development theory, my classmates and I would often spend much of class critiquing the models and theories of respected scholars. We would impose our most vigorous scholarly lens and often criticize how a model or theory was created, tested, and applied. In hindsight, it was energizing and remarkably easy to harshly judge the work of people (who had spent years, decades, or a whole career carefully developing the models that have shaped our understanding of complex phenomena). Even though we had never created anything close to a model or theoretical framework, our lack of experience or knowledge did not hinder us from engaging in our "critiquefest."

In my second year of graduate study, I took Retention Theories taught by Sharon Fries-Britt. For our final project, we had to create our own model or theory of student retention. It was then I realized that theory and model building were remarkably difficult to do. For this project, I drew on everything that I knew and had learned, and came up with an unremarkable model of retaining commuter students. Through this project, I learned one of my most important life lessons – *It is much easier to tear something apart than it is to build it.*

After experiencing the critiques of my model, I became much more respectful and appreciative of the courage and effort that it takes to develop and share one's work. It also became very clear to me in that moment as a young pre-professional that graduate school was really just the beginning of a much longer journey of growing into the higher education professional and scholar that I might one day become.

Discovering the Scholar in the Practitioner

Years ago, I heard Susan Komives speak of the scholar practitioners as those higher education professionals who actively use scholarly work to inform their practice or to create scholarly work that benefits the field. This idea that there are higher education professionals who excel as both practitioners and scholars was deeply intriguing to me. I was curious about this professional identity, but at the time it was only a very distant possibility. Like so many other graduate students, I was just trying to make it to the end of the term with papers, readings, and projects while balancing the demands of my assistantship and personal life. Maybe my becoming a scholar practitioner would happen one day, but not in the near future.

By the completion of my master's degree I was exhausted and burnt out. I had chosen to engage in an additional year of coursework beyond what was required and wrote my master's thesis and a book chapter while working full time.

During this time, it was difficult to imagine ever pursuing a doctoral degree. The only way I would engage in doctoral work is if I came upon a question that was so compelling to me, that I would have no choice but to engage in the disciplined and intensive exploration afforded through doctoral study.

In the decade following my master's graduate school years, I find myself strongly drawn to the identity of the scholar practitioner. Much of this has resulted from years of contemplating the question of what does it mean to develop and assess multicultural competence in student affairs organizations. For me, this question remains complicated, persistent, and perplexing. Professionally, I have read many articles and books on the subject, attended workshops, served on committees, and engaged with colleagues on this topic. In 2006, my colleague and friend Jake Diaz asked me to join the Division of Student and Campus Life's Multicultural Competencies Evaluation Team. As we worked with the framework from Pope, Reynolds, & Mueller (2004), *Multicultural Competence in Student Affairs*, it was clear that assessing organizational multicultural competence is very difficult and made more difficult by the lack of validated instruments with which to do so.

In recent years, when I was a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies program at the University of Vermont, I decided to explore measuring multicultural competence in student affairs organizations using the model in Pope et al. (2004) for my final project in a quantitative research methods class with Bud Meyers. Each week, Professor Meyers would ask us to report on our progress. I would share my ideas, but I was never able to answer his question of what measurement instrument I would use to explore my question. I had always assumed an instrument was out there, but that I just could not find it.

Out of my growing frustration, I decided to call Amy Reynolds, a co-creator of the model, hoping she could help point me in the direction of an instrument based on the model. During our conversation, she revealed that neither she nor her colleagues had developed an instrument to operationalize the model. She was also unaware of anyone who was working on this. In a moment that I will never forget, I remember asking, "Would it be o.k. with you if I tried to develop an instrument from the model?" To my surprise, she said yes and quickly followed by saying, "Developing an instrument is a lot of work... let me know if I can help."

Joining the Scholarly Community

The phone conversation with Amy changed my life and my professional identity from a consumer to a creator, from a practitioner to a scholar. Over the

next 2-3 years, I began the painstaking work of developing, testing, and refining an instrument called the Multicultural Competence in Student Affairs Organizations (MCSAO) questionnaire for my doctoral dissertation. Had I fully comprehended what Amy warned, I might have been scared off by the enormity of the task. To date, I have spent thousands of hours attempting to define and operationalize organizational multicultural competence in student affairs. As a result of this effort, I developed an instrument and tested it at more than 20 institutions across the U.S.

I believe that now the real work begins of sharing my work in new forums, subjecting my research to scholarly review, and using this instrument to answer new research questions. I anticipate that the MCSAO questionnaire will be a significant part of my life and professional identity for the duration of my career.

I still love creating mixed-media visual art, but as I look back on the last three years of my doctoral work and career, I realize that at the time, my research was my art. My tools were decidedly different. I had to learn new skills in survey research and statistical methods. I sacrificed vacations, cooking, socializing, and my identity as a visual artist for the joy of pursuing the answer to an important question in my profession. I gave up a lot, but also gained a lot by willingly immersing myself in new territory.

Now my professional journey is calling on me to understand and embrace my dual identity as a scholar practitioner. I love both. I am both. With this dual identity, I feel a profound responsibility to share what I am uncovering and to have the courage to put my work forward so, one day if I am lucky, my work too will be subject to vigorous discussion and critique by eager graduate students.

References

Pope, R.L., Reynolds, A.L., & Mueller, J.A. (2004). *Multicultural competence in student affairs*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.