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Love the Questions

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I admit that I just recently completed the task of unpacking the last of my University of Vermont and Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration (HESA) boxes. In opening the boxes, I found myself reviewing papers I had written, discovering random notes from a conversation shared with a classmate, and skimming textbooks that I promised myself I would read again without the time constraints of a busy semester. It was with deep pride that I perused *The Vermont Connection* and the contributions that my classmates and fellow alumni/ae offered to higher education. The questions posed by authors consistently stimulate our thinking, attitudes, and understanding of the power and potential of our collective and individual work. I trust that the questions posed throughout this special anniversary volume of the journal reflect the questions that our profession, our institutions, and our global community face which are sure to prod, produce, and provoke change. In shifting through my HESA binders, I found a paper that I structured by asking questions of myself within the spirit of the Moral Conversation, which is the foundation for the three questions posed in this reflection.

Rainer Maria Rilke asks that we “love the questions...I want to beg you, as much as I can, to be patient toward all that is unsolved. Try to love the questions themselves. Do not now seek the answers that cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.” (Christensen, Garvin, & Sweet, 1991, as quoted in Nash, 1997, p. 187)

Here then are three questions that I am gradually beginning to answer as I think about my time in the HESA program.

What are the lessons learned from two years in Burlington? Where in my practice are these lessons prevalent?

Even as I pose this question, it seems a bit elementary. My HESA experience is too complex to fit into a succinct and accurate reflection and the knowledge I gained continues to unfold for me. And yet, there were two things I knew for sure from my first encounters in Burlington, throughout my two years in Vermont and upon my departure.

I suspect I am not the only HESA alumna who changed dramatically as a result of the amazing students, faculty, supervisors, and others associated with the program. I am a better person because of the friends and colleagues, who are now throughout the country and shared in my experience. Their relationships are simply gifts that I never properly and fully acknowledged to them in the moment and I am appreciative for that moment now.

My perspective on both personal and professional issues was challenged and supported and I now seek opportunities for similar interactions with colleagues. Because others asked questions of me, I ask questions of the students, administrators, and faculty with whom I currently work. HESA faculty diligently create an environment that offers the chance to both speak and to be silent, trusting that each is valued and respected. Through observation and participation, I learned how to foster comparable situations, an invaluable lesson in a busy, materialistic world. Many other lessons appear in my professional practice and personal experiences, but...

What is my responsibility as an alumna?

I have thought about this question, long before I began this reflection, searching and struggling to discover an answer. My response is understandably complex, but a few themes emerge. During HESA, much of my research interest focused on the idea of being in a community as an individual within higher education. I recognize the many benefits I gained through the program and believe strongly that they would be wasted if I did not actively remain in the community. Because of this, I understand that through my contributions to *The Vermont Connection*, the College of Education and Social Services, and The University of Vermont, my commitment to HESA remains alive. As a HESA alumna, in my current work with students, I expect myself to encourage students to ask questions and support their process of answering the questions posed to them. I believe that the questions that I considered and debated as an

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undergraduate and graduate student greatly shaped my perspective and in some small way, my conclusions may have affected the communities and institutions of which I was a member.

Within my place in our national community, I share a responsibility to work for and articulate the importance of higher education in our country. I am disheartened and dismayed when I read articles and hear of students who speak of their education in terms of pure preparation for their chosen profession. Lost in the current debates, at both the state and federal levels, is a discussion of liberal arts education and the importance of education for the overall and overarching benefit for our nation. When I first read the work of John Henry Newman (1982), I did not imagine I would quote his work, but it is appropriate:

We are instructed, for instance, in manual exercises, in the fine and useful arts, in trades, and in ways of business...But education is a higher word; it implies an action upon our mental nature, and the formation of character...When, then, we speak of the communication of Knowledge as being Education, we thereby really imply that Knowledge is a state or condition of mind; and since cultivation of mind is surely worth seeing for its own sake, we are thus brought once more to the conclusion... Knowledge, which is desirable, though nothing come of it, as being of itself a treasure, and a sufficient remuneration of years of labour. (p. 86)

The educational experience, both in and beyond the academic classroom, is powerful for students and educators alike. I do not want to be part of the generation that loses the idea of pursuing knowledge and learning about the world we live in as a sustainable end of higher education. I do not believe that my HESA experience will let me be an educator that forgets the spirit of Newman.

What are my hopes for the HESA program and The Vermont Connection?

On a professional level, my understanding of my complex role as an educator began to take shape as I immersed myself in HESA work; I hope that future students experience a similar development. But because my HESA experience deeply transformed me as an individual, which, almost as a by-product impacted my professional development, the personal is where the heart of my answer lies. As a communitarian, my HESA experience is more defined by “others,” my classmates, faculty, supervisors, and alumni, than by myself, as an individual. My classmates taught me immeasurable lessons and broadened my perspective beyond description. I hope that HESA continues to seek and discover students who enrich the lives of those with whom they interact throughout the HESA program and The University of Vermont.

I do not doubt that my other immediate desire for the Journal and the program will be achieved. I hope that we continue to ask hard questions of our former classmates, current students, faculty, colleagues, administrations, government leaders, and most critically, ourselves. In considering the questions facing student affairs and higher education, I trust that we will continue the tradition of offering answers that stimulate change in current professional practices. And in the end, my deep hope is that somewhere in our Socratic conversations, we find answers that bridge our common humanity as individuals living in community. Tierney (1993) noted, “We create community, then, not through the received wisdom of the ages, but through the present interactions of our hopes for the future” (p. 78). I am grateful that the HESA community is a place that allows me to consider the questions in this reflection and may it continue to be so in the future.

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