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## The Final Word

Ada Ramirez Puches

I am not a HESA grad and I don't have a graduate degree in higher education. I come out of a very different academic tradition --- the law.

When I left college in 1980, I had only one concrete thought in my head about the world of work --- I wanted to help people. I was from a low-income background and advocacy work was all I could relate to. Shortly after graduation, I managed to secure an entry-level paralegal position at Legal Services, the federal program providing civil representation to indigent individuals. I worked every day with people who are generally forgotten by society --- if not abused and mistreated. My clients included, a woman whose landlord had illegally evicted her and her children in the dead of winter, a mentally ill and formerly homeless man who had been abruptly cut off of his Medicaid benefits, and countless physically ill people whose lives deteriorated as their health, and then their economic resources, faded. In many respects this job was my greatest educational experience.

After several years of advocating for individual clients, I began thinking about making the leap to policy work. My commitment to my clients had not diminished, but I thought, as many advocates do, that I should be making a broader impact. I accepted a position with a lobbying firm that represented human services and low-income organizations on a statewide basis. We worked on budget issues and legislation --- creating new programs and protecting and expanding rights for various populations from the homeless to children receiving welfare benefits. Having the individual client background strengthened my lobbying arguments and provided a human touchstone for the numerous policy defeats we suffered over the years. My commitment to working on poverty issues continued, but my frustration grew. I wanted every available skill and tool to combat what I saw as overwhelming social ignorance and systemic injustice. I was ready for law school - or so I thought.

My law school experience was a deeply divided one. I think all my law school professors saw justice and compassion as foundational issues in a law school education. And they provided law students with a fundamental understanding of the philosophy and structure of the law. Some, like my alma mater, go further and offer a model for the promotion of public service opportunities. Law schools, however, are bound by their histories and missions to measure law school students by their ability to think and not necessarily by the way law students treat people or by the way they feel people are being treated. My feelings about injustice, about my former clients, about the political structures and institutions in this country that promote and protect class distinctions and racial and ethnic divides were validated, but more often outside the classroom than in. Inside the classroom, the elements I prized most about humanness - the ability to connect through emotions and values - were not irrelevant. They just were not the primary focus of a law school education.

It was only years later I realized what compelled me to go to law school had more to do with a nurturing instinct than with a litigious one. I continued working as an advocate and activist, sometimes as a lawyer, on issues that mattered to me. And I had managed to find work that used the skills I acquired in law school, while not necessarily playing the exclusive role of lawyer. After a brief stint in Washington, D.C. working for a national children's anti-poverty policy center, and several years in New York working for an international activism group on environmental racism, I moved to Vermont.

In 1997, I was hired as the first coordinator of the Non-Profit Program. This unique resource is housed in Career Services at UVM and provides advising and programming for students and alumni/ae who are interested in socially responsible careers. It was in this capacity that I was first introduced to the HESA program. Our office had a HESA graduate assistant and several practicum students. After a few semesters in my position, my director advised me to offer a practicum to HESA students. I admit that I was more focused on the free-labor aspect of the arrangement than on the possibility of finding a like-minded community.

From the first graduate student I interviewed for the non-profit practicum, HESA students have expressed their knowledge of and desire to explore the varied social and political issues this broken world provides us. Not having a Student Affairs background, I was ignorant of the scope and intensity of HESA students' interests. In addition to wanting to be of service to others, my students were studying human development, diversity, social justice, and spirituality. They were interested in careers addressing racism, homophobia, hunger, and literacy.

Many of these students were also looking to incorporate their social values into their careers in higher education. Some had strong personal community service backgrounds and had even taken time off between their undergraduate education and HESA to commit a year or more of their lives to a service program. Their interests might lie more expressly with higher education positions administering service-learning, community service, or leadership programs.

Perhaps my most personally fulfilling experience with the HESA program has been supervising a small, but favored (just kidding), group who have decided to look for issue-based work in the non-profit world. The education they have received in the HESA program, their need to help others, and their values about the world we live in, make non-profit work their first choice at this point in their lives. If they return to higher education, I believe the institutions they work for will be enriched by their experiences.

As an added bonus, I have found myself, over these past few years with my HESA graduate students, in conversations that I searched for in law school. Although my students are taught case law, ethics and legal precedent, they are also free to express their sentiments, politics and personal choices in their graduate program. We could and do discuss inequities in everything from the academy to public education. They bring their whole selves - nurturing and analytical - to these discussions, to their education and to their chosen fields. HESA students bring the same elements I prize most about humanness, connecting through emotions and values, from the classroom to their communities. This is something I can't help but advocate.