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From Mountains to Monuments: A Reflection

Kirsten E. Freeman

Author's Note: Higher Education and Student Affairs (HESA) graduates enter the profession qualified and prepared. However, even the finest preparation will leave HESA graduates unaware of what lies ahead. The author reflects on the transition out of graduate school and into the working world while considering the challenges and successes faced during the first year. She also explores the impact that the HESA environment has on both the professional and the person.

While it wasn't required reading for a HESA class, and may not stack up against Newman, or Mill, or Rudolph, or even Kohlberg, Gilligan, or Perry, his written words were magical – even lyrical. The author is, however, a theorist in his own way, and could definitely be called an educator! Some of life's greatest lessons can be found in his words. Many of us have probably received this book as a gift.

The name of the book that I found so inspirational was, Oh, The Places You'll Go. After re-reading this book, I wondered to myself, "Did Dr. Seuss graduate from the HESA program?" Nope, no Seuss in *The Vermont Connection* directory. The book remarkably mirrors my first six months transitioning after leaving HESA.

Congratulations! Today is your day. You're off to Great Places! You're off and away!

It was May 19, 2000, the graduate hooding ceremony and HESA dinner; the culmination of two years of HESA was celebrated in one evening. I think now how ironic it is that it was a celebration because that weekend was full of tears and good-byes. It was the end of an era – at least for me. Two years spent with the most challenging and encouraging classmates, professors, supervisors, and mentors. My academic life, my professional life, and my social life were all entangled, and I could not separate one from the other. My classmates had become some of my best friends.

I remember a conversation I had following my undergraduate graduation. A mentor of mine in the field told me that my next two years of grad school would change me in a way that was unimaginable to anyone and everyone who did not follow the same path. She told me that I will get to know my 15 classmates – their thoughts, values, opinions, and preferences – better than I have ever known even some of my closest friends and relatives. Two and a half years later, that conversation makes much more sense. The discourse sparked in our classes, the concentration, the content, the complexity, and the comfort displayed by all, allowed my classmates and I to see each other in a light that no one had ever seen us in before. This unique experience gave us even more than friendship; these individuals had also become my confidants.

One cannot forget, however, about the faculty, assistantship supervisors, or practicum supervisors. They were true teachers from whom I learned more in two years than I had learned in all of my undergraduate years. Classmates, faculty, and supervisors; together, we were a family. We all had a role in my success. Assistantship, practicum, and class expectations were set high, very high, and I faced my share of disappointments and frustrations. I was provided support and guidance, and, of course, advice – even when I didn't ask for it. People lent a hand and cared how I was doing. We laughed, we cried, we shared good news and bad, and sometimes we argued. I was proud to be part of it all, and most of all, proud of the accomplishments of my amazing classmates. We truly were a family.

So, the "celebration" the weekend of May 19 was to celebrate two glorious years. Two years filled with excitement and accomplishment. Two years where my life was not put on hold as expected, but lived to the fullest. It was a time to remember good friends and good times, to say our congratulations and our thanks.

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You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes. You can steer yourself any direction you choose. You're on your own. Any you know what you know. And YOU are the guy who'll decide where to go.

It was time to move on. I was given the tools; I had learned the techniques. I was told that my classes, assistantships, and practica had prepared me for the real world. With my resumes done and my comps defended, I knew it was time to go. The education and the experience were successful; I had put theory into practice. I had it all...except the confidence.

Life is definitely cyclical. It was as if I was back at HESA orientation when I remember thinking to myself, "What if they find me out?!" I thought I didn't belong there, that I would fail. I mean, it must have been some mistake that they let me in, didn't they see my GRE scores? But, I didn't fail. The faculty were right! And now it was time for me to put my trust in them once again. They told me I was ready and prepared, that I could make a difference.

I was ready to enter the working world. Because I went to graduate school right after college, I had never been anything but a student. What would it be like? After all, this would be my first experience as a full-time employee, my first experience having a salary, my first experience with health benefits. The only questions were "where" and "what." Where would I find a job? What kind of job would I find? I did not know the first thing about taking a job.

Lucky for me, spring semester of my second year of HESA was filled with the infamous resume building and interview technique workshops. I eventually (after many drafts) became quite skilled in knowing how to create an acceptable resume and being prepared for interview questions.

Mid-semester, I took a couple dozen copies of my resume and a few dozen hints about successful interviewing to ACPA and the dreaded placement process. Based on past experience, I looked at jobs in community service and service-learning, student activities, and admissions. Residential life jobs, well, they weren't for me. I thought that residential life was one of the areas of student affairs in which I had little experience. During graduate school, my first practicum was in residential life, the only practice I ever had. I was never a resident advisor during my undergraduate time; I wasn't even on hall council.

Little did I know that my single practicum experience combined with the time spent with my residential life colleagues at UVM would ultimately prepare me for a job in a residential life department!

You'll look up and down streets. Look 'em over with care. About some you will say, "I don't choose to go there." With your head full of brains and your shoes full of feet, you're too smart to go down any not-so-good street.

So I chose to go down a very new street. Yes, I actually "chose" my job. Granted, I had my share of rejections, but that was all part of finding the right "fit." Once I found the appropriate fit, I realized where to go could be my choice. So I chose to move to Washington D.C. – a tad different from Vermont. My first professional job, at The George Washington University, was in an environment that was extremely different from anything I had experienced before, and I was very excited!

And when things start to happen, don't worry. Don't stew. Just go right along. You'll start happening too. OH! THE PLACES YOU'LL GO! You'll be on your way up! You'll be seeing great sights! You'll join the high fliers who soar to high heights.

Time passed quickly after I accepted the job and before I knew it, July was here. I started my job as the Assistant Director for the Community of Scholars at The George Washington University (GW). Now, what exactly does the Assistant Director for the Community of Scholars position entail? Well, that is a very good question. This position was brand new and the expectations were vague but high. While my main responsibility is coordinating the first-year living and learning communities, I am still figuring out exactly what I am supposed to do. Not only was my position new, but the "community of scholars" was an initiative still in the infancy stage, and I was the person hired to make it happen.

My job as Assistant Director is within the Freshman Services area of the Community Living and Learning Center – more frequently known to people outside the university as the “residential life department.” Good thing for my practicum! After all this time, I was finally in a residential life position (albeit a live-out one.) And, I love what I do! I primarily am involved in the programmatic planning and the coordination of the daily activities and events of the communities. However, I have also been able to write a curriculum, advise organizations, supervise students, co-teach a class, work with faculty, and create 14 additional communities for next year. I would not have been as successful this year if it were not for my two years in the HESA program. While I may not recite theories on a daily basis, the theories that I have learned, combined with the practical experiences HESA provided, are an integral part of who I have become as a professional.

Wherever you fly, you'll be best of the best. Wherever you go, you will top all the rest. Except when you don't. Because sometimes, you won't. I'm sorry to say so but, sadly, it's true that Bang-ups and Hang-ups can happen to you.

The transition, however, has not been as smooth as I might have made it sound. Granted, I fully enjoy and am satisfied with my job responsibilities. However, GW and D.C. are very different than UVM and Vermont. Finding an apartment was the first challenge I faced. I pay three times as much as I did in Vermont for an apartment one-third the size. However, I live in the heart of D.C., right in Dupont Circle. I live above a coffee shop and can walk the mile to and from work each day. This is a good thing, considering my car was stolen from a D.C. parking lot! Some days on my way home, I venture four or five blocks out of the way to walk by the White House.

GW tends to mirror the political atmosphere of D.C. Students are not quite as laid back as Vermonters, and the campus bureaucracy is different than anything I have previously experienced. We wear suits almost daily in our residential life office. Not exactly the relaxed environment of UVM where business attire meant you put on closed-toed shoes!

All Alone! Whether you like it or not, Alone will be something you'll be quite a lot.

Alone, well not really, but I am not part of the happy HESA cohort anymore. While I am friendly with colleagues, and some have even become good friends, it is not the same as graduate school. The days do not allow time for the same amount of good discussions. People don't really know me, and I don't really know them. It is not bad, just different. It can be hard getting used to a new organization, especially one with such a different structure. Being a staff member does not entitle me to the same sense of protection and support that I was offered as a graduate student in HESA.

The impression of community here on campus is also different. “Building Our Community Day” was an annual event at UVM in which our offices each took part. While we also strive to build community here at GW, at times it seems much harder to do. For our students, the community is not just the campus, but our nation's capital. Instead of mountains, we have monuments. The size of the city is considerable and the experience diverse. However, without a doubt, my new community has its powerful charm.

So be sure when you step. Step with care and great tact and remember that Life's a Great Balancing Act.

One of the greatest lessons I ever learned during my time in HESA is that I am always a student. Life is full of learning moments and education is an ongoing process. I will continue to build new skills and learn new competencies through my work. I will still grow through the interactions of new colleagues and fresh conversations. I may not always understand why things are done differently than I was used to while in HESA, but I am now equipped to ask the essential questions and discover new possibilities. These new and exciting experiences, combined with all of the challenges, now serve the purpose of furthering my own education.

Balance was often hard to achieve as a graduate student. It is still not simple as a new professional. Some days the challenges are many, and for assistance I find myself reaching back to my HESA classmates and experiences. There is a sense of comfort and support in knowing what you know. This has made me realize there is more yet to know and more challenges to face, for my adventure is not over. As I continue to “go” I

will take my HESA knowledge, friends, and support with me. I will choose with care, and choose with courage, and know that HESA will always be with me.