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Coming Full Circle: The Road Less Traveled

Keyiona Ritchey

College student success goes beyond academic performance in the classroom. With the different social and transitional challenges that arise, students need to be supported holistically, particularly those coming from underrepresented backgrounds. Barriers that these students face are not a new phenomenon in the (un)changing academy. Collier and Morgan (2008) acknowledge that non-academic factors such as social integration, level of financial support, and campus climate are also important in contributing to student retention (pp. 431). Admission, persistence, and graduation are not an easy feat, specifically when you do not have the cultural capital to navigate the college experience. Through the use of Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) I will use the lens of my intersectional identities as a Black woman and first generation college student from a low-income, overcoming institutional/intuitonal and personal barriers in the pursuit of higher education. The highlighted themes are prevalent in numerous areas throughout higher education, extending beyond the scope of practice for student affairs practitioners/practioners to encompass divisions such as enrollment management, human resources, diversity and multicultural affairs.

“Out of the huts of history’s shame,
 I rise,
 Up from a past that’s rooted in pain,
 I rise,
 I’m a black ocean, leaping and wide,
 Welling and swelling I bear in the tide”

—Maya Angelou

Keyiona Ritchey is an Assistant Director of Admissions for Diversity and Partnerships at the University of Vermont. She is a 2014 graduate of the HESA program at UVM. Her passion includes holistically supporting students from underrepresented backgrounds in their pursuit of higher education encompassing admission, persistence, and graduation.

Opening Reflection

After completing a year in my first professional position, I could not help but reflect on my experiences thus far and the road I took to get here. How did I get to this point in my life? Obtaining a master's degree and working in the Office of Admissions at the University of Vermont (UVM) all seem surreal to me. Living in Vermont has challenged me personally and academically in many ways. I have had to step outside of my comfort zone and learn how to navigate a place that was culturally foreign and opposite of where I grew up. Nonetheless, living in Vermont has allowed me to grow and expand my horizons; contributing to the person I am today.

Nash (2004) asserted that "Scholarly personal narrative writing is meant primarily to benefit readers, touch readers' lives by informing their experiences, by transforming the meaning of events, and...delivering wisdom" (p. 28). Through the lens of Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN), I will elucidate my intersectional identities as a Black woman and as a first-generation college student from a low-income background. Bradley (2009) stated, "We all have a narrative to share that could help another person or group of people. We all have experiences that, when given thought and framing, possess universalizable attributes and application for our profession or communities" (p. 28). This article will address my following experiences relating to family dynamics, my pursuit of higher education and beyond, and my work in college admissions.

Family

I am one of five children in a low-income family. I am the first and only one to graduate from high school, go to college, and obtain a master's degree. As the first in my family to go to college, having to navigate the admission process, persisting, and graduating on my own became central to my identity. The more I started to learn about who I am, the history of Black Americans, and what it means to be a Black woman in America, the further I grew apart from my family. When I returned home in my early years as an undergraduate student, I tried to empower my siblings to think about higher education. I was consistently met with, "you think you know everything," and "stop preaching to us". It was a hard reality I had to accept, yet I took it in stride.

In retrospect, being a first-generation college student has impacted me in many ways I would have never imagined. I could not have been prepared for how this newly formed identity would impact my life. According to Jones and Abes (2013), "one's sense of self and identity is constructed through interaction with others and a larger social context, which includes systems of privilege and oppression, social norms, and societal expectations" (p. 57). As a first-generation college

student, I had to learn and reexamine who I was in the context of my immediate family and who I was in academia. Trying to reconcile these two identities was difficult to first understand and then navigate. At home I felt as if I was always seen as the only child who went to college and “made it,” while in academia I felt as if I was “not good enough” because of where I came from.

I grew up in an environment where going to college was not part of the culture. My community was plagued with drug addiction, alcoholism, gangs, mental illnesses, liquor stores, and fast food restaurants on every other corner. Most people were in survival mode, living from paycheck to paycheck. There were no expectations that I would graduate from high school or do anything remotely positive with my life. In the back of my mind, I always knew I wanted and deserved a better life for myself. I just did not know how to make that come to fruition having grown up without any positive role models. It became very easy to accept the status quo for what is expected of people who lived in my community.

High School

I attended three different high schools, and the last one exposed me to college. I was never a “smart” student, but I was always a hard worker. I did not know any of the details about making college an actual reality. I also did not know anyone who went to college besides my teachers, most of whom were White. I never took honors or Advanced Placement (AP) classes mostly because I did not know of their existence or of their significance. When I began to genuinely inquire about college, I soon found out about this information and realized it was too late to enroll in these classes. In addition, I was not prepared academically to handle the rigor of these classes.

College started to come to the forefront of my mind when I was in eleventh grade. My guidance counselor would shout information in the hallway that pertained to the college admissions process. I would follow up with what he said by going and talking to him. At this point, I began to realize more and more that I wanted to make a better life for myself and the only way I knew this could become a reality was by going to college. In my senior year of high school, I was adamant about applying to four-year institutions, even after being advised to attend a community college. Barely meeting the minimum entrance requirements, I was not considered a competitive student. I was not oblivious to the fact that I was not going to get accepted to selective or flagship universities. Nonetheless, I hoped I would get in somewhere.

Based on my family’s income threshold, I was eligible to apply to six universities in the California State University (CSU) system for free with a waiver. Out of the six schools on my list, the one school I cared the most about getting accepted

to was California State University Dominguez Hills (CSUDH). I was told it was known as the most diverse university west of the Mississippi River. In addition, I had also attended a community event where I met with representatives from the University and a current student who was from my neighborhood. Out of the six schools I applied to, I got accepted to one! That lucky school was CSUDH. I was ecstatic because not only was this the University I wanted to attend but also it was my only option. Receiving an offer of admission to CSUDH forever changed my life for the better.

Undergraduate Experience

CSUDH is located in Carson, California, two hours away from my home, making it the perfect distance for me. It was not too close where I would still see everyone I went to high school with, but not too far away that I could not come home for a weekend or the holidays. Historically, CSUDH serves first-generation, low-income, students of Color from the South Bay region of Los Angeles. With CSUDH being a diverse school, I hoped the culture shock and transition of going to college would be lessened, especially since I was already coming in academically disadvantaged.

According to Harper, Jones, Schuh, and Associates (2007), “research shows that the trajectory of academic success in college is established long before students matriculate” (p. 258). I was never a part of any college preparation programs or student success programs prior to college or once I was a matriculated student. According to predictors of college readiness and success, I was not academically prepared to perform at the college level based on my academic record in high school. However, those same tools do not measure qualitative perseverance. Despite having the odds stacked against me, I remained tenacious and went on to persist and thrive in college where I graduated with honors.

During my first year of college, I was miserable because I was in an unfamiliar setting without my family and friends. I was constantly questioning if I made the right decision. Nora, Pascarella, Springer, Terenzini, and Yaeger (1996) explained “First generation students differ from their traditional peers in both the personal and educational characteristics they bring with them to college and in the nature of the experiences they have during their first year” (p. 18). After completing my first year, I was ready to quit. I had been placed into remedial English and algebra, and could not seem to pass my remedial algebra class. I stayed in my room majority of my time and watched television. I was introverted and did not know how to make meaningful friendships. I had no guidance on how to make the best out of my college experience academically or socially. Luckily, I had a couple of cousins that lived in a nearby city who would pick me up on the weekends and take me over to their house. This was the only thing I looked

forward to.

Even though I was feeling overwhelmed and defeated at the end of my first year, I decided I was going to stay and finish what I started. That became the catalyst for me in becoming proactive in my life and deciding what I wanted and needed from college. I joined Pan African Union (PAU) my second year and started working at the Multicultural Center (MCC), which opened up my worldview drastically. I was exposed to the system of oppression we live in and learned that I could be a change agent. In *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), bell hooks, having read Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, explained a profound insight she came to regarding systems of oppression as a

moment in my life when I was beginning to question deeply and profoundly the politics of domination, the impact of racism, sexism, class exploitation, and the kind of domestic colonization that only takes place in the United States (p. 46).

I came to a similar epiphany while being involved with an internship program called Diversity in Action (DIA). This internship opened my eyes to the numerous social injustices that have taken place and continue to do so in society. As a result, I was able to begin to think critically about my race, gender, and socioeconomic identities and how they intersected. This knowledge has been the foundation and lens of how I do my work and continually frames why I am passionate about the work I do. I had a paradigm shift where my perception and understanding of what it means to be a first-generation college student was influenced by my experiences of being a Black Woman. I became cognizant of how I walked in this world and how others viewed me.

Higher Education and Student Affairs

Amy and Reesor (2009) said, “New professionals come to student affairs with expectations formed in their undergraduate and graduate experiences” (p. 5). Being a student leader on campus exposed me to the field of student affairs. During my last year as an undergraduate student, I was introduced to a variety of graduate programs in student affairs including the Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration (HESA) program at UVM. When researching different graduate programs, I was looking for a program that was completely different than my undergraduate experience. I wanted to gain broader exposure to the field of student affairs. I applied to the HESA program and soon after I was invited to come for an on-campus interview. Subsequently, I received a letter of admission, and an offer for an assistantship. The HESA program did not let me down regarding my expectations for the program. I was challenged in many ways that facilitated my growth personally and professionally.

The same feelings I had my first day of class as an undergraduate student resurfaced. I was feeling overwhelmed and insecure; moreover, I began questioning if I made the right decision. Patricia Hill Collins (2009) stated, “U.S. Black women intellectuals have found themselves in outsider-within positions in many academic endeavors” (p. 15). From the beginning of graduate school and well into my first year, I consistently felt like an outsider within. I was intimidated starting graduate school because of my lack of cultural capital. Bourdieu (1977) defines cultural capital as “linguistic and cultural competence and the relationship of familiarity with culture which can only be produced by family upbringing when it transmits the dominant [White, heteronormative, middle and upper class] culture” (p. 494). In addition, I was commuting to campus that became a barrier in familiarizing myself with the city and developing meaningful relationships. Lastly, I felt that I was starting at a disadvantage compared to my peers because of my lack of knowledge and involvement with Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, such as NASPA. I felt like no one could relate to where I was coming from. I had one foot in the door and the other foot out the door. I was wrestling with so many feelings of self-doubt on top of being isolated and homesick considering all my family and friends were 2,965 miles away in California.

I experienced many ups and downs with the demands of the HESA program. However, it was through those demands and the theory to practice model that I was able to gain a wide range of experiences that ultimately helped shape me into the professional I am today. My assistantship in the Office of International Education and my practicum experiences in admissions, conference and events, and the Women’s Center provided me with a broader understanding of the field and helped cultivate my passion for wanting to work with college students.

It was through my student development theory courses that I acquired the language to be able to name what I had experienced in my own development as an undergraduate student. For this reason, the theory of self-authorship has resonated the most with me. Magolda (1998) defines this theory as “the ability to collect, interpret, and analyze information and reflect on one’s own beliefs in order to form judgments” (p. 143). Since the age of seventeen, I have been the author of my own life. I realized that by beginning to form my own judgments and envisioning a life for myself outside of the community I grew up in, I was already reaching new heights of success.

Full Circle

While working in the Office of Admissions as a new professional, I find myself full of questions that pertain to college access and equity. A substantial part of my role is to work with three high schools in the Bronx that UVM has a partnership with. These high schools serve students from underrepresented backgrounds. I see aspects of myself in a lot of the students I work with coming from the Bronx, who face similar barriers to those I have faced. As an admissions counselor I have to be cognizant of the different identities these students hold and the implications that it will have on the college admissions process, and ultimately persistence at UVM. Not only do I want these students to choose to attend UVM, I want them to be successful in all their endeavors during their tenure as well.

My goal is to help students determine if UVM is the right fit for them academically, socially, and financially, in addition to be able to shed light and demystify the college admissions process. Students have a lot of options available to them, and the admissions process can be very daunting. Systemically it is harder for students coming from underrepresented backgrounds to graduate from college. Collier and Morgan (2008) posed the question, “Why do some students succeed in college while others do not? Specifically, why are some types of students predictably more likely to graduate from college, while others consistently pose ‘retention’ problems?” (p. 426). I believe it is because of one’s cultural capital that influences predictions on who is likely and not likely to succeed in college.

I have been able to achieve a higher level of access to academic, economic, and social mobility, as a result of the opportunity to attend an institution of higher education. It is because of this mobility and my current position in college admissions that I feel I have come full circle. Robert Frost’s 1916 poem “The Road Not Taken” resonates with me as I reflect on my journey about the cultural capital I started with, where I am now, and ultimately where I envision myself in the future. It is crucial to understand how one’s personal narrative and intersecting identities impacts one’s experiences with admissions, persistence, and graduation. My experiences in breaking down barriers, overcoming fears, and not giving into resistance in pursuit of a college degree has brought me much joy. It is my desire to show the students I interact with, students with similar backgrounds as mine, how to navigate the road less traveled.

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