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The Words I Never Spoke, The Letters I Never Sent

Demeturie Toso-Lafaele Gogue

The memories of my last semester of graduate school still remain fresh in my mind: counting down the days until graduation; sitting in a circle in Deb's class talking about how stressful the job search was; or the constant reassurance from our faculty that we would all have a job (maybe not by graduation, but we would eventually get a job). I remember the feelings of joy we shared when one person in our cohort accepted a job offer, but also the feelings of emerging anxiety that filled the room as individuals began to question whether or not they would be next in line to hear from a school. Before we knew it, graduation had commenced and we were walking across the stage, receiving our diplomas, and saying our goodbyes. That was May 2017.

It has been a little over six months since I left Vermont to pursue the next chapter of my life back home in California. Although there is a feeling of liberation from not having to endure the three-hour class meetings and the numerous essays asking us to reflect on our experiences, there is still a part of me that misses The University of Vermont's (UVM) Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration (HESA) experience. I am not sure if it was the tiresome nights writing papers alongside members of my cohort who also procrastinated or the sporadic hangouts at Citizen Cider after class to de-stress. Maybe it is the fact that I am sitting in my office alone trying to write this reflection while students are on vacation for the holidays. Whatever it may be, this feeling of nostalgia has reminded me of where I am now, the people that have helped me get here, and the immense gratitude that I have for those whose shoulders continue to lift me higher. It has also reminded me that many of these sentiments I have kept to myself, even to this day.

This year's journal theme, "Dear Student Affairs: Reflections of the Past & Hopes for the Future," has provided me an opportunity to reflect on my experiences in the UVM HESA program and the people, places, and moments that made my time in Vermont challenging and worthwhile. This is not a letter to Student Affairs, but to those who have made me into the student affairs scholar practitioner that I am today.

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To My Cohort

Despite all the ups and downs during our graduate experience, I miss all of you. I miss walking into Mann Hall 211 and seeing everyone's faces as we felt the mixture of dread and wonder for the three-hour class session ahead. I miss the look that people gave Carrie and I whenever a group project was announced because everyone knew that we had already agreed to work together. But most of all, I miss the people who I could undergo the struggle with—people who were also navigating and surviving the HESA experience.

During our last semester of graduate school, we had various classes with Dr. Pamela Gardner who assisted in our job search preparation. We went over resumes, on-campus interviews, and the negotiation process. In addition, student affairs professionals would rave about their experience as new professionals: better pay, no more papers or classes, and having more time to do what they wanted. As I reflect back on those conversations, I wish someone would have told me how lonely it could be as a new student affairs professional.

Moving to a new place and starting the next chapter of my life, it was difficult to find others at the institution where I work who were also navigating similar experiences. Moreover, trying to create friendships outside of the student affairs bubble proved to be difficult. I have come to acknowledge that most of the friendships I developed were through school. Now as a full-time professional, it seems that the only friendships I can make are with those who I work with. Working from 9:00 A.M to 5:00 P.M. (and sometimes even later) makes it difficult to want to go out and be an extrovert when all that I really want to do is make dinner and rest for the next day. Although I love my students and the work that I do, I miss being able to come together with peers to talk about experiences we were dealing with.

I know there are those people who I swore I would never talk to after my HESA experience, and there are also those who I thought I would communicate with on a weekly basis. Regardless of my friendship status with my cohort members, it was still comforting to come to class and feel a sense of camaraderie with peers who had to endure the weekly memos that were due for our Higher Education Law course. It was reassuring to know that it was not just one person who procrastinated on their literature review for our Cultural Pluralism course. Above all, it was nice to know that I was not alone. As I continue to make peace with where I am, I am constantly thinking of everyone in my cohort and hoping that they are not simply surviving, but thriving. I am hopeful that we are doing amazing work wherever we are.

To The Faculty

Before leaving Vermont, I remember thinking that the most valuable experiences were those spent in practicum and the graduate assistantship. It was through those avenues that we as emerging student affairs professionals would be able to obtain the skills necessary to be effective leaders on college campuses. Although the classroom conversations were critical to understanding our work in the field, I never thought I would reflect on assignments I stressed over or the classroom dynamics that were mostly coupled with petty drama. As I have ventured more into my role as student affairs professional, I am finding that not only am I using my past experiences in practicum and my assistantship to inform my practices as a professional, but I am also using the strategies and tools that my faculty utilized to engage me as a student both in and out of the classroom.

Before my first day of teaching, I had to craft a syllabus that would allow my students to explore leadership development and mentoring strategies while also thinking about the type of classroom dynamic that I wanted to establish. I was immediately drawn to the format that UVM HESA courses were often taught—sitting in a circle and discussing the readings, while also relating the course content to our own experiences as graduate assistants. I wanted to create a classroom experience where open communication was welcomed and where the exchange of stories could flourish—an atmosphere that was prevalent during my HESA experience.

“What came up for you?” I asked my class as they finished reading an article on first-generation student experiences in higher education. I paused for a moment, reflecting on the fact that those were the words Dr. Deborah Hunter would start her class with. I smiled and watched as my students began engaging with the course material and reflecting on their own experiences navigating the college culture. This was just one example in which my experiences as a graduate student informed my own practices as a new professional.

Before the class began, I had reflected on Dr. Jason Garvey’s syllabus assignment, which ultimately helped in the creation of my own very first syllabus for the course that I would be teaching. I utilized Dr. Tracy Ballysingh’s use of weekly reading reflections to help my students prepare for class discussions by having them engage through online forums. I even incorporated more creative approaches to learning, such as having my students draw pictures that convey their leadership style, as exemplified in Dr. Kelly Clark/Keefe’s course. Yet, there was still something missing. I had developed my syllabus and I knew what type of assignments I wanted to give my students, but I was still unsure on how I wanted to engage with my students. It was then I thought of Dr. Vijay Kanagala’s approach of challenging his students to be pioneers of their own learning and to delve

deeper into discussions around topics that needed to be deconstructed. I wanted my students to be critical scholars of their experiences and of their education—a characteristic that I developed through Dr. Kanagala’s mentorship and teaching.

It is important to note that I have not mastered these techniques that I have observed from my faculty. This process of teaching, learning, and engaging continues to be a journey that I am committed to restructuring as it suits my own pedagogy. Although this is a process I am still navigating, I am constantly reminded of my faculty and the ways that they enhanced my learning and consequent practice.

To My Family

Whenever someone asks me why I am so passionate about my education, it is easy for me to talk about my family, especially my grandparents. Though at first they did not see the value in education, my family become the ones who ultimately motivated me to continue my studies regardless of the challenges that I encountered. All of the awards and accomplishments that I received, I attribute to them.

At the end of my first year in graduate school, however, my grandmother passed away. I had to leave school abruptly to return home to be with my family during this difficult time. I remember walking through the door and seeing my family together. It was evident that they had been crying all day. What surprised me the most was my mother’s first words to me that night: “You need to go back to school and finish. It’s what your grandma would have wanted.” I had just traveled ten hours from Vermont, caught in an emotional whirlwind, and was greeted with what sounded like a goodbye. But she was right; my grandmother’s priority for me was my education. Being the first in my family to graduate from college and then to continue on to pursue an advanced degree was an accolade my grandmother always prided herself on.

Now that I have received my graduate degree and am employed full-time, there is a part of me that wonders if I am continuing to make my family proud. The only way I ever thought I could please my family was through my academics. Even now, there is this cloud constantly hovering above that has reminded me that the journey ahead is far from over and there is more work for me to do: obtain a doctorate degree, become a faculty, conduct research with Pacific Islander communities, and so much more. These past six months, however, have felt different. No longer was I earning grades, but a paycheck. No longer was I staying up late to finish papers, but now I am waking up early to make it to work on time. Having to adjust to these differences have been a gradual process, one that I am adapting to as I delve deeper into this new chapter of my life.

Despite the lifestyle dissonance, there have been benefits to working as a full-time professional: I have had more time to not only spend with my family, but also grow with them. Because of my academics, I have never been close to home. After six years in college and graduate school, I have finally made it closer to home where I can spend random weekends and major holidays with my family. My mother was right when I first told her that I accepted a job back in California: “You’re coming home because your grandmother wants you to be closer.” Being closer to home has allowed me to find more ways to better support my family and my community.

As I have drawn closer to my family, I am continuously grounded in the reasons that have ultimately brought me to the field of higher education and student affairs. I am enveloped in this work to ensure younger generations of my community see higher education not only as a dream but also a tangible possibility. I continue to strive for better to show my community that we deserve more than what we expect of ourselves as well as those standards that society holds us to. It is because of my family that I have made it this far. To my family: fa’afetai, fa’afetai lava.

To Myself

I thought it would be befitting to end my piece by writing a segment dedicated to my own journey and growth. As I reflect on my time as a new professional, I have recognized the ways in which I have been unkind to myself. During my time in graduate school, I never doubted my abilities in being a good student: I was proactive in completing my assignments, finishing assigned readings, and even ensuring that the work I produced was of its utmost quality. As I transitioned into my new role as a professional, however, I doubted my abilities to connect with students as well as produce the same quality of work that I could pride myself on. I felt that I was wasting time, gaining professional experience rather than going directly into a doctorate program. A large part of these negative emotions stem from this internalized pressure to graduate quickly in order to be a role model not only for my family but other Pacific Islanders as well. However, specific and serendipitous moments have reminded me that I was meant to be on this path.

When I began my role during the summer, I had the opportunity to speak with various incoming first-year students about the First Generation Student office as well as the larger Campus Diversity and Inclusion department. After informing students of the various programs and services and engaging students in an ice-breaker activity, one female student walked up to me at the end of the session and asked, “Are you Pacific Islander?” I was caught off guard by her question, but I nodded in response. A big smile appeared on her face and she informed me that she was also Pacific Islander. She continued to talk about how surprised she was

that there were Pacific Islander higher education professionals at the university. “This already feels like home,” she said. It was at the moment that I realized the impact of being able to work with students who share the same identity.

As I have worked with students throughout the past few months, I have witnessed a change in my role. In addition to programs and services that I coordinate, students have also found my office to be a haven where they can congregate, study, or talk about experiences that they are currently navigating. As one student phrased it, “I have someone I can cry to now. My friends don’t have that at their university.” Part of doing this work is trusting myself and recognizing that I have the knowledge and experience to support students. It was through my cohort, faculty, and family that I am able to be the effective student affairs professional that I am. Despite having doubts regarding my skills, I am gradually learning that I am more than enough. In the words of a wise mentor, *I am exactly where I need to be.*