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EXPLORING EXPLORATION;  
UNPACKING THE JOURNEY TO DECLARING AN UNDERGRADUATE  
MAJOR

A Thesis Presented

by

Kimberly Hughes

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For an the Degree of Master of Education  
Specializing in Interdisciplinary Studies

August, 2021

Defense Date: May 25<sup>th</sup>, 2021  
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## ABSTRACT

As an advisor for undeclared students, I see daily how anxieties around declaring a major, around getting a job after graduating, and around identifying a singular passion delay the process of finding an academic home for first years. This master's thesis investigates undeclared students' financial, social, personal, and familial motivations for choosing their major. It offers advice for how to find a major that aligns with these motivations, while also addressing key concerns such as time to degree, sustaining curiosity, and encouraging intellectual and creative development.

Drawing on secondary research, I will reflect upon three consistent themes: the importance of narrative building, the privilege of having a passion and being able to pursue it, and the value of a liberal arts education in particular to the types of students who find themselves beginning college without a major. I bring these three themes together around four topics related to advising undeclared students: the myth of the singular path, the importance of innovation and adaptation in the workplace, the relationships we have to the work we do, and the value of experiential learning. I augment higher education research and students' experiences with my own journey as an exploratory college student. This work is therefore an example of Scholarly Personal Narrative or SPN writing, a type of autoethnography that aims to make meaning of one's experiences and situate them within a pre-existing body of research. My hope is to alleviate anxiety for my students, to help fellow advisors understand their students' journeys, and to encourage support from my students' loved ones and peers.

This thesis is dedicated to my students.

Past, present, and future.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The spring of 2021 has been an unprecedentedly busy period of my life. In addition to writing my thesis, I took on new responsibilities at my full time job, acted as maid of honor for my best friend's wedding, and moved out of the apartment that had been my home for 3.5 years. I therefore have to thank many people, who supported me, kept me sane, and believed in me when I had zero faith that I could get it all done.

I of course have to thank my thesis committee, Tracy Ballysingh, chairperson Abigail McGowan, and my advisor Cris Mayo. I also need to extend the utmost gratitude to Robert Nash, who began the Interdisciplinary Master's program and served as my advisor for my first two years. My writing projects for Robert's classes, along with our group therapy-like class sessions, gave me a newfound confidence and much needed sense of self. To that end as well, I must thank Amy Magyar, who helped talk me into writing this thesis, and who always gave me the most inspiring feedback on my writing.

I thank my co-workers, in particular Lise Larose, who put up with me not finishing assignments on time because I was working on my thesis or packing to move. And though she is much more than a co-worker to me, I'll also take this opportunity to thank Katie Babione, without whose timely distractions (typically in the form of 12-hour Bollywood movie marathons) I never could have survived all of this.

My family has always been endlessly supportive. Many thanks to Susan Hughes for accepting my tearfully stressed phone calls, Chuck Hughes and Sally Friedman for their constant encouragement, and Kristine Forney, for instilling in me an immeasurable appreciation for education. And, of course, my sister, Chelsea Hughes. When I first met

Robert Nash to discuss the possibility of joining the Interdisciplinary program, he asked me if I had one person in my life who would be my rock through the program, no matter what. Chelsea's name was the first to come to my mind, and she lives up to that every single day.

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## **Introduction**

### **1.1 What I wanted to be when I grew up**

When I was a kid, and was constantly barraged with the question of “what do you want to be when you grow up”, my answer was never “I want to be an academic advisor to undeclared first-year college students”. Imagine the looks I would have gotten if that had been my response. The earliest answer I remember giving to this question was “rabbit” (I was somewhere in the neighborhood of four years old). I cycled through more plausible answers as the years progressed—marine biologist, actress, UN delegate, archaeologist, librarian, costume designer, English teacher, and I’m sure others that I’ve since forgotten. When I was 27 years old, I was asked if I would like to adopt the role of academic advisor to undeclared first-year college students. I accepted, because it made sense to take advantage of an opportunity to move forward in a career I hadn’t known existed until about a year before the offer was made. It’s a great job, and a near perfect amalgamation of the skills I’ve cultivated over the course of nearly three decades. But I didn’t dream of it, and didn’t strive for it. Really, I stumbled into it.

I suppose the journey was somewhere between a stumble and a confident stride. The acquisition of my current job was the result of a good education and commitment to learning, of skills honed in seemingly unrelated odd jobs, of my privilege as a white middle-class cis woman, of the encouragement and support of family and friends, and of a carefully developed heir of professionalism. But none of these influencing elements is the same as the passion I’ve been expected to exhibit towards a career path since I was pre-school aged.

The hodge-podge of potential careers I considered in my childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood were mirrored by a far from straightforward journey to declaring my major. I started college thinking I'd be a French major, as this had been one of my strongest subjects in high school. Two weeks into my first semester, I dropped my only French class. After that it was History, then Archaeology, then English, and finally Comparative Literature (I threw a Medieval and Renaissance Studies minor in too, for some added specificity). My floundering in the face of declaring my major was yet another influencing element on the road to my current career. I've often described myself as the "poster child" for being Undeclared. While I do draw upon the skills I learned as a Comp Lit major to think critically about how best to advise my students and to write some truly stellar emails, it was more the journey than the destination that rendered me suitable to advise Undeclared students. I could have ended up exactly where I am if I had declared History, or English, or Theater. I only see Comp Lit as leading me to this job as I see any decision large or small leading us down unknowable paths; I may not have ended up here if I'd pursued a different major, not because I would lack the skills to do the job well, but because I would have set myself upon a potentially vastly different life trajectory. But all of my decisions brought me to the moment when my office's two Assistant Deans officially offered me the position of Professional Advisor to Undeclared First-Year students. Sometimes I love my job. Those are my luckiest days. But even on the days where I'm grumpy or reluctant to face my students, I still consider myself lucky. I have a good job, which pays for me to have a good life, and I'm happy. There have been many times over the last 2 dozen years since I was first asked about my future career plans when I and others close to me doubted that I would ever get so lucky.

I have seen firsthand how my story is relatable for not only the students I advise, but my fellow grown-ups who also struggled to settle on a singular academic and career path. In my experience, the struggle is nigh universal. And yet my students continue to come to me with an idea that they are all alone in their uncertainty, doubting that they will ever find an academic home, and therefore believing they will never find a suitable career.

As an advisor for undeclared students, I see daily how anxieties around declaring a major, around getting a job after graduating, and around identifying a singular passion delay the process of finding an academic home for first years. I therefore share my story here, alongside anecdotal evidence from my advising adventures and scholarly research into best practices for helping this vulnerable population. This work is therefore an example of Scholarly Personal Narrative or SPN writing, a type of autoethnography that centers around making meaning of one's experiences and establishing their value and use within a pre-existing body of research. My hope in doing so is to alleviate anxiety for my students, to help fellow advisors understand their students' journeys, and to encourage support from my students' loved ones and peers. This work places my stories in the context of broader research, and reflects upon three consistent themes: the importance of narrative building, the privilege of having a passion and being able to pursue it, and the value of a liberal arts education in particular to the types of students who find themselves beginning college without a major. I bring these three themes together in conversation around four key topics related to advising undeclared students: the myth of the singular path, the importance of innovation and adaptation in the workplace, the relationships we have to the work we do, and the value of experiential learning.

The remainder of my introduction will address methodology and the reasoning behind my decision to write an SPN thesis. Chapter one is a review of literature. Chapter two addresses the myth of the singular path, and attempts to dismantle the idea that a student must select one career-related major and commit to that career for the remainder of their lives. Chapter three focuses on the career-related values of a liberal arts education. Chapter four encourages reflection regarding why we are drawn to certain types of jobs, why some jobs are considered real and therefore deserving of love, while others are not. And Chapter five articulates the importance of experiential learning. Each chapter concludes with a note to my students. Throughout each of the chapters, I will reference advising-related interactions with my students. Please note that all names and insignificant details have been changed, to protect my students' privacy.

## **1.2 Methodology: Why Scholarly Personal Narrative**

In his book “Liberating Scholarly Writing: The Power of Personal Narrative”, Robert Nash reminds readers that “...there is genuine wisdom and meaning in the unique life you are creating for yourself and for others... what you have lived, loved, loathed, and learned in a lifetime of extraordinary (or ordinary) challenges and satisfactions can be of enormous benefit to others.”<sup>1</sup> This summarizes what has been the most significant and empowering take away from my time studying in the program Nash created: my newfound appreciation for the value of my own voice. I have struggled for the entirety of

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1. Robert Nash, *Liberating Scholarly Writing: The Power of Personal Narrative*, New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2004, 24.

my life with the idea that my thoughts, my contributions, my perspectives, have nothing to add to a conversation. SPN writing taught me that my unique set of experiences gives me a perspective that no one else in the world has exactly, and that makes me important. Therefore, that makes what I have to say important.

But SPN writing is not a self-serving genre. I do not share my story of being Undeclared for the sake of asserting my own relevance to the topic. As Nash notes, “Scholarly personal narrative writing is meant primarily to benefit readers, touch readers’ lives by informing their experiences, by transforming the meanings of events...”<sup>2</sup> I share my story because I truly believe it will be of value to my audience. I know many will find my experiences relatable, and those that don’t may benefit from exposure to new viewpoints. I use my story as a sparking point, from which I can begin to challenge the limits of my experience. I furthermore hope that the telling of my story will encourage others to do the same. My story should not silence others, but rather empower them to share. Voices other than mine will create a richer narrative, in particular where those voices disagree with my experiences, or advance into territories I may never encounter.

My story has significance on its own, but stands stronger with the support of scholarly research. No work of Scholarly Personal Narrative writing would be complete without reference to relevant scholarship. Nash defines relevant scholarship as that which “provides a context, deepens your writing, extends its implications, grounds its insights and, most of all, explicitly acknowledges the contributions of others to your thinking.”<sup>3</sup> But I find myself using scholarship more extensively in this work than in my past SPN

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2. Nash, 29.

3. Nash, 66.

writings, or in most of the SPN works I have read. This work may rest somewhere between SPN and analytic autoethnography, which Leon Anderson defines as “seeking to understand the topic under study by placing it within a social analytic context.”<sup>4</sup> The analytic autoethnographer understands that qualitative and quantitative approaches alone are less effective than the two drawn into conversation with one another. This requires “not only truthfully rendering the social world under investigation but also transcending that world through broader generalization.”<sup>5</sup> My experience provides insight and context, but is limited in its scope. Inclusion of perspectives that differ from mine, complicate mine, or even those that agree with mine broaden that scope. There is a reciprocal relationship within analytic autoethnography, as my story shapes and is shaped by scholarship. My role as a researcher into this topic has impacted the ways in which I engage in the act of advising Undeclared students, just as my past experiences exemplify the research I have done. Analytic autoethnography inspires a “self-understanding [which] lies at the intersection of biography and society: self-knowledge that comes from understanding our personal lives, identities, and feelings as deeply connected to and in large part constituted by—and in turn helping to constitute—the sociocultural contexts in which we live.”<sup>6</sup>

In their extended critique of Anderson’s “Analytical Autoethnography”, Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner caution that “If you turn a story told into a story analyzed... you sacrifice the story at the altar of traditional sociological rigor. You transform the

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4. Leon Anderson, “Analytical Autoethnography,” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35, no. 4 (August 2006): 395, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241605280449>, 378.

5. Anderson, 388.

6. Anderson, 390.

story into another language, the language of generalization and analysis, and thus you lose the very qualities that make a story a story.”<sup>7</sup> I therefore attempt to avoid, to use Ellis and Bochner’s term, appropriating my story “for the purpose of abstracting something they call knowledge or theory.”<sup>8</sup> My approach is this: here is my story, and. As I have said, my perspective is not omniscient, and in order to have the greatest impact, it will be served by being put in conversation with other stories. In particular, as a privileged white middle class woman, I will do my best to complicate my story with those belonging to marginalized voices.

One of my favorite in-class Robert Nash quotes is, “The shortest distance between two strangers is a story.” I, too, see stories as a means of finding common ground. Even if the specific circumstances of my story are not relatable, the feelings depicted likely will be more so. Stories are, by their nature, both general and specific—specific to me, the teller, but generally relatable to a broad range of readers and listeners. A story is therefore a highly effective means of drawing attention to a particular issue, in that it inspires empathy. I use scholarship not to pad my story, but to ground it. It is, on its own, relatable. But the research inspired by my story and the stories of others like (and unlike) mine will broaden its applicability.

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7. Carolyn S. Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner, “Analyzing Analytical Autoethnography: An Autopsy,” *Journal of Contemporary Autoethnography* 35, no. 4 (August 2006): 429–49, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241606286979>, 439.

8. Ellis and Bochner, 431.

## **2. Chapter One: A Review of Relevant Literature**

Nash asserts that scholarship is “all about loving ideas so much that we are willing to play with them, to take chances with them, to express our passions about them, to deliver them in some fresh, new ways; to nurture and care for them; and to continually test and challenge them in the company of others.”<sup>9</sup> The “S” of Scholarly Personal Narrative writing is therefore a place of exploration and adventure. It provides a space for me to engage in a dialogue, to set my personal narrative alongside others’ ideas and see what new ideas come to fruition. Throughout this work, I will play with my ideas and the ideas of others. In order to do so, I take this opportunity to present some of the relevant scholarship that guided the development of my thesis. It should be noted that the studies referenced below were all conducted at large, public, research institutions. Further research will need to be done to determine whether these patterns remain consistent for exploratory students at small, private, liberal arts institutions, like the one I attended.

### **2.1 Undeclared Personality Traits and their Implications**

Buford and Nestor conducted a study of 102 undeclared students enrolled at a large public university, to find correlations between students’ personality traits and their journey to declaring a major.<sup>10</sup> Participants were found to be skilled at identifying and solving problems, and adaptive to new situations. These two traits combined suggest that

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9. Nash, “Liberating Scholarly Writing”, 45.

10. Melanie Buford and Heather Nestor, “The Plight of the Undecided Student,” NACE, May 1, 2019, <https://www.nacweb.org/career-development/special-populations/the-plight-of-the-undecided-student/>.

exploratory students<sup>11</sup> have a tendency to get caught up in a loop of assessing the appropriateness of a given major, identifying (real or imagined) problems, and then quickly adapting to a newly identified potential major. Such a cycle makes progress towards deciding on a major difficult, as nothing may ever seem like an appropriate fit. Exploratory students were also found to demonstrate resistance towards traditional ways of approaching situations—again related to their ability to adapt and problem solve—and distaste for working within rigidly structured systems. The process of declaring a major may thus be complicated by a desire to break from the norm and work outside of imposed structures. Given the evidence from Ashraf et al suggesting that students who change their majors are less likely to graduate in four years,<sup>12</sup> undeclared students would seem to be at a disadvantage due to their adaptive and rebellious personality traits.

Yet Workman interviewed exploratory sophomores at a similar university to Buford & Nestor's, and found that study participants experienced little discomfort or anxiety around being without a major.<sup>13</sup> Although they expressed a feeling of being obliged to declare, they also indicated that they preferred their exploratory experience to that of peers who declared early on and changed their minds. Even so, Ashraf et al indicate that this latter pattern is more likely to lead to successful outcomes, which they

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11. Throughout this work, I will use the terms “exploratory” and “undeclared” apparently interchangeably. However, I have tried to draw a distinction wherein I only use the term “undeclared” when referring to a student or group of students who do not have a major. “Exploratory” may also refer to students who have a major declared but are uncertain of their major, and therefore are continuing to explore their academic options.

12. Rasha Ashraf, Jonathan Godbey, Milind M Shrikhande, and Trace A Widman, “Student Motivation and Perseverance: Do They Explain College Graduation?” *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 18, no. 3 (September 2018): 87–115, <https://doi.org/10.14434/josotl.v18i3.22649>.

13. Jamie L. Workman, “Exploratory Students’ Experiences With First-Year Academic Advising,” *NACADA Journal* 35, no. 1 (2015): 5–12, <https://doi.org/10.12930/NACADA-14-005>.

define as timely graduation. Their in-depth research into the relationship between major declaration and student success asked how three factors would influence degree completion: early major declaration, willingness to change major in the face of difficulty, and continued performance improvement post major change. The authors predicted that students who declared their majors early would be more likely to graduate on time, reasoning that early declaration indicated commitment and determination to succeed. Their results supported this hypothesis: timely graduates (those who graduate in 4 years or less) were found to be the higher performers and early declarers.

The answer to reconciling Ashraf et al's encouragement of early declaration with Workman and Buford & Nestor's findings around exploratory personality traits lies in Ashraf et al's later observations around the benefits of sticking with an unsuitable major compared to changing from an unsuitable to a suitable major. Ashraf et al define an unsuitable major as one "that does not fit the student's ability and interests",<sup>14</sup> therefore causing undesirable academic setbacks such as poor performance or delayed graduation. They found that students who changed from an ill-fitting to a more suitable major may have done so at the expense of timely graduation, but students who stuck with an ill-fitting major were less likely to graduate at all. The observed adaptability of exploratory students suggests that they will be more likely to graduate if they do change their majors rather than forcing themselves to conform to the constraints of an unsuitable major. Here they are actually at an advantage compared to their declared peers, who may lack this

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14. Ashraf et al., "Student Motivation and Perseverance", p. 95

adaptability and struggle to improve academic performance after a major change has taken place.

Exploratory students may find it difficult to narrow their interest down to one department of study. Structured majors that do not allow for individual adaptation are therefore an ill fit for the average exploratory student. Because they tend to be much broader in scope, majors within the liberal arts seem to best suit exploratory students.

## **2.2 Financial Impact of Delayed Graduation**

Potentially delaying graduation is a decision that comes at great expense for those students who struggle to pay their tuition. Hernandez traces the origins of the student debt crisis back to World War II, when higher education became an option not just for society's elite, but for the middle- and lower-classes as well.<sup>15</sup> He depicts how the profit-driven student loan industry has systematically eliminated all related government regulations, including consumer protections against extreme garnishment and the ability for student loan debt to be discharged by declaring bankruptcy. Tuition costs have increased as institutions of higher learning begin to be run more like business. The exorbitant cost of higher education and extreme likelihood that a student will graduate in debt contribute to a desire to complete a degree in as few semesters as possible. It is therefore the students from less advantaged socio-economic backgrounds who will be

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16. Carlos J. Hernández, "Chronicle of a Debt Foretold: The Student Loan Crisis and the Erosion of the American Education Dream," 2012.

most impacted by delayed graduation. And these students are also more likely than their upper-SES classmates to begin college without a major declared.<sup>16</sup>

Completing a degree is a luxury, one which students from underserved communities are less likely to achieve compared to their more privileged peers.<sup>17</sup> An exploratory student, whether they begin their college career with or without a major, is already at a disadvantage compared to a declared student when it comes to completing their degree within the most affordable timeline. Frequent major changes delay graduation further, raising costs and driving students more deeply into debt. This creates a greater distance between a student and the perceived economic benefits that come with earning a degree.<sup>18</sup> As students see themselves falling more deeply into debt, they may opt to forego degree completion for the more immediate pay off of joining the work force. It therefore falls to advisors of undeclared students to help them reflect on what will be suitable vs unsuitable majors, and what actions will lead to degree completion in the fewest possible semesters. It becomes the responsibility of the advisor to not only support students through the major decision making processes, but also to tailor their support based on their students' financial privileges or lack thereof.

These findings suggest that students have their best chance at graduating on time if they declare early on and avoid time spent undeclared, even if they change their major later in their college careers. This begs the question, are these students graduating on time

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17. Yingyi Ma, "Family Socioeconomic Status, Parental Involvement, and College Major Choices—Gender, Race/Ethnic, and Nativity Patterns," *Sociological Perspectives* 52, no. 2 (2009): 211–34, <https://doi.org/DOI: 10.1525/sop.2009.52.2.211>.

18. Michael N. Bastedo and Ozan Jaquette, "Running in Place: Low-Income Students and the Dynamics of Higher Education Stratification," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 33, no. 3 (September 2011): 318–39, <https://doi.org/DOI: 10.3102/01623737114067/8>.

because of their early declaration, or because they come from a more successful academic background that has better prepared them for college? The study's results found that students with higher GPAs took less time to declare their major, indicating greater confidence in selecting a suitable department of study. High-performing students are more likely to be successful in any major they choose, or are more likely to have experience in identifying their strengths and weaknesses and choosing a major accordingly. It is therefore unclear whether the connection between high GPA, early declaration, and timely graduation is correlative or causative. Carnevale & Rose found evidence to suggest that a student's preparedness for college is not as great a determining factor of their success as is the amount of money which a given school is able to invest in their success.<sup>19</sup> In other words, students with lower SAT scores and high school GPAs are more likely to earn their degree if they attend a more demanding and selective top tier school compared to the lower tier schools to which they are typically undermatched. Carnevale & Rose posit that one reason for this may be top tier schools' ability and willingness to invest in academic support services that identify and assist struggling students sooner, reestablishing their path to success and graduation early on. Again, advisors are shown to be a key component in student success, because they can help bridge the gap between high school and college and guide less prepared students towards a suitable major in the most cost efficient timeline.

### **2.3 Familial Influence & The Value of Self-Reflection**

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19. Anthony P. Carnevale and Stephen J Rose, "Socioeconomic Status, Race/Ethnicity, and Selective College Admissions," The Century Foundation, March 2003, 1–81.

Studies have also found a high dependence upon relationship-building among undeclared students.<sup>20</sup> Some students benefit from the support of their family and friends, and such students may feel comfortable making major-related decisions based on the best interests of a close-knit family unit. Other students are not so much supported as pressured to make hasty decisions.<sup>21</sup> They rely on the approval of their loved ones, and may be unable to move beyond conversations where individuals of significance express disapproval of their major and/or career choices. They often struggle to engage in self-reflective practices or to understand the motivations behind their loved ones' disapproval. Buford & Nestor encouraged advisors of exploratory students to teach independent thought and decision making practices, while also directing them towards supportive groups of undeclared peers.<sup>22</sup>

Ma's study found that a student's socioeconomic background often influenced choice of major as well.<sup>23</sup> Students from lower SES families were more likely to declare majors with predictable (and typically lucrative) career outcomes. They viewed major selection as a means of entering into a higher strata than that of their parents. Upper SES students were found to have the luxury of selecting a major based on intrinsic rather than extrinsic value, if they so desired.

Self-reflection is here again important when we consider Ashraf et al's observations around suitable vs unsuitable majors. Ma only researched the relationship of family economic background to initial major declaration, not to major change. If any

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20. Buford and Nestor, "The Plight of the Undecided Student".

21. Workman, "Exploratory Students' Experiences With First-Year Academic Advising".

22. Buford and Nestor, "The Plight of the Undecided Student".

23. Ma, "Family Socioeconomic Status, Parental Involvement, and College Major Choices".

student, regardless of their SES, is unable to perform to the best of their abilities within their initially declared major, self-reflection will be key to helping them determine whether their chosen major is in fact unsuitable. If they do determine the major to be suitable, advisors can help them to seek appropriate academic supports in order to achieve success. Such persistence within an unsuitable major may lead to delayed graduation, and therefore a major change would make more sense. If family members have influenced a student's initial decision, it may be all the more challenging for advisors to encourage that student to look inward to find a new path. If a major change becomes necessary for them to avoid the further prolonging of their graduation (and therefore further accrual of tuition and debt related costs), advisors need to be respectful of exploratory students' tendencies to value their familial input over their own desires, while also encouraging self-reflection on the part of the student towards the most suitable department of study.

## **2.4 Career Concerns & The Liberal Arts**

Exploratory students often expressed feeling like they were alone in a world of declared majors. Connecting exploratory students to one another allows them to build relationships with those who are understanding and non-judgmental about their goals and experiences. Workman encouraged socialization among exploratory students, noting how interviewees valued the growth of their social circle.<sup>24</sup> One way for exploratory students to find support among their peers is through enrollment in a course designed to guide

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24. Workman, "Exploratory Students' Experiences With First-Year Academic Advising".

students through their exploration. Buford & Nestor found that participation in such a course helped the majority of students come closer to a decision about declaring their major. At the start of the course, 36% of students had already selected their major, 50% had honed in on a few options, and 15% had no ideas. Upon completing the course, 67% of students had chosen a major, 31% were still considering a few options, and only 3% still had no idea. 93% of students who enrolled in the course indicated that it had contributed positively to their exploratory experience. Interestingly, students ranked topics such as “Reflection on goals/career decisions” and “Finding internships/job search tools” above “Narrowing down majors” in terms of usefulness.<sup>25</sup> Workman found that career-readiness courses assisted exploratory students towards potential majors, which further indicates that career preparedness is forefront in an exploratory student’s mind when choosing a major.<sup>26</sup> Students in Workman’s study mentioned feeling deterred from majors relating to the liberal arts because of their low earning potential compared to majors such as Business. This was the case even when students demonstrated a strong interest in or talent for the liberal arts.

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25. Buford and Nestor, “The Plight of the Undecided Student”.

26. Workman, “Exploratory Students’ Experiences With First-Year Academic Advising”.

## Chapter 2: The Myth of the Singular Path

### 3.1 One major = One job

As previously mentioned, I tried out several different majors before ultimately settling in Comp Lit. Interestingly, I never seriously considered majoring or even taking classes towards the two subjects about which I was most passionate: Theater and Creative Writing. I harbored dreams of becoming an actress into my mid-twenties,<sup>27</sup> and I have always known that, no matter what I do for work, I will always want—perhaps even need—to write. But I made excuses for why I didn't want to study these subjects in college. I'd say that the Theater classes were always too hard to fit into my schedule, or I'd seen bad reviews of that professor or other. I'd explain that Creative Writing would be too restricting, and I'd have more success writing what I wanted to write on my own.

The truth of what motivated me to avoid my passions was fear. I was afraid I'd be told I wasn't good enough, and then I'd have to find new dreams. Many of my very realistic, and perhaps even pessimistic, family members discouraged me from Theater with their constant reminders of how difficult the life would be. They warned that I'd face constant rejection, and have next to nothing to live off of. They were less unsupportive of Creative Writing—at least that they could see leading to a career in publishing or something similar. Never once did they encourage me to think of other careers less directly related to these majors, to imagine that I could immerse myself in the subjects I loved in college without committing to the life of a starving actor or author upon receiving my diploma. No one ever offered suggestions like, “Perhaps you'll teach

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27. Really, who am I kidding, I still hope I might one day be discovered and undergo a meteoric rise to stardom.

acting or writing, or work as an administrator for a theater. Maybe you'll end up with a non-profit devoted to the arts. Or you could utilize your public speaking and communication skills to leverage your way into many different types of jobs." No one gave me permission to pursue my passions while I had them, and then understand how to negotiate them in the direction of new passions, or to use the skills I'd cultivated to find careers that could eventually become passions. There was only one possible path, they told me: major in an art, become a struggling artist. And it was easier to turn my back on my dreams unpursued rather than fail to achieve them.

I've often said that I strive to be the advisor I wish I'd had when I was in college. To be a supportive voice for the pursuit of passion where it exists, and where it doesn't, to encourage broad study and the growth of multifaceted skills. I want my students to know that they will find a way forward, no matter what they major in. They are in the midst of crafting the unique stories that will bring them, if not where they anticipated they'd end up, to something just as rewarding. Eventually.

### **3.2 Multipotentialites**

One of the most common majors that my students wish to explore into is Business. As this major is not offered in our college, this means they will need to pursue coursework in Calculus and Economics in preparation to transfer into UVM's Grossman School of Business. Here they will progress through a specialized major that comprises more than half of the credits they need to graduate. Given their tendency to abhor structure, upon hearing what a degree in Business will entail, many of my students decide it's not the path for them.

This was the case for my student R.J., who proposed Business to me as a possible major at the end of his first semester in college. I had gotten to know R.J. well by that point, and most of our conversations had centered around the possibility of declaring a Music major (he was already working towards the minor). The shift from Fine Arts to Business took me by surprise.

A little light prying revealed that R.J. was being heavily influenced by his father and sister to declare either Business or Economics as his major. His hesitance to pursue Music came from a fear very much like mine when I was in college, the fear of struggling to break into a notoriously difficult industry. But R.J. also wanted to work with people and to improve his communications skills. He wanted to continue with Spanish to the point of being fluent, and study abroad in a Spanish-speaking country. He had no personal desire to learn either Economics or Business, and he didn't like any of the subjects he enjoyed enough to be willing sacrifice studying the others as well.

R.J. is now nearing the end of his Sophomore year, and he just recently declared his major in Global Studies. He also added a minor in Spanish alongside the Music minor. With this combination of subjects declared, RJ is able to continue studying most of what he'd enjoyed, without feeling like he's limited himself. He's an example of Buford and Nestor's findings that exploratory students strongly rely on the influence of their loved ones in choosing a path;<sup>28</sup> he was ready to forgo what he was actually good at, what he actually enjoyed, in order to suit his father's vision for his future.<sup>29</sup> But he is also

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28. Buford and Nestor, "The Plight of the Undecided Student".

29. R.J. did end up registering for an Economics class at one point, and dropped it within the first two weeks of the semester.

drawing together a wide range of skills in pursuit of his major and minors: the fine arts, languages, social sciences, and humanities are all represented.

My own anecdotal experience fits neatly alongside Buford & Nestor’s findings that exploratory students feel drawn in many directions, tend to be overwhelmed by choice, and are influenced by their family and friends towards ill-suited subjects.<sup>30</sup> I have found, as their study did, that my students were relieved and encouraged by Emilie Wapnick’s TED talk about being a Multipotentialite. Wapnick defines a Multipotentialite as someone who combines different academic and career paths to create innovative fields, or push the boundaries of existing fields.<sup>31</sup> Buford and Nestor shared Wapnick’s TED Talk with the students in their study, and the majority found the Multipotentialite concept to be highly encouraging: “Students embraced the idea of putting their (multiple) interests at the center of their academic and professional plans... [they] openly voiced their pleasure at the mere existence of an alternative to the traditional narrative of college and career.”<sup>32</sup> Exploratory students relate to Wapnick’s TED Talk because she depicts and ascribes validity to their frustrations around having to limit their interests to one particular field. Wapnick begins her talk by criticizing our culture for the early age at which we begin to demand that children tell us what they want to be when they grow up. “While this question inspires kids to dream about what they could be,” she explains, “it does not inspire them to dream about all that they could be”.<sup>33</sup> Wapnick notes that it was

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30. Buford and Nestor, “The Plight of the Undecided Student”.

31. Workman, “Exploratory Students’ Experiences With First-Year Academic Advising”.

32. Buford and Nestor, “The Plight of the Undecided Student,” p. 26 – 28.

33. Emilie Wapnick, “Why Some of Us Don’t Have One True Calling”, Filmed April 15 in Bend, Oregon, TED video, 12:17, [https://www.ted.com/talks/emilie\\_wapnick\\_why\\_some\\_of\\_us\\_don\\_t\\_have\\_one\\_true\\_calling](https://www.ted.com/talks/emilie_wapnick_why_some_of_us_don_t_have_one_true_calling).

primarily boredom that motivated her decisions to shift paths, and described feelings of fear and anxiety rooted in a belief that her inability to choose a singular path was problematic. “The notion of the narrowly-focused life is highly romanticized in our culture,”<sup>34</sup> she explains, and this is evinced by the fact that we expect one single answer from any individual—from pre-school through young adulthood—of whom we ask the question of “what do you want to be”.

While I and my exploratory students find comfort in the idea that we might be defined as Multipotentialites, that we might be in the same camp as the successful and creative entrepreneurs Wapnick depicts, it is not my intention here to reduce the concept of academic exploration down to a single personality type. Though I will return to this concept as it relates to certain of my undeclared students, any field of study would welcome those who Wapnick would call Multipotentialites. People like to be categorized, but in so doing, we risk creating hierarchies. Rest assured, whether my students identify as Multipotentialites or not, I still have every confidence in their potential to move mountains after they graduate, regardless of their choice of major. And even among specialists, academic inquiry and curiosity for its own sake can and must always be encouraged.

### **3.3 The Plight of the Passionate/less**

As the question of “what do you want to be” transitions to “what do you want to major in”, Multipotentialite students find themselves at a distinct disadvantage. The

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34. Wapnick, “Why Some of Us Don’t Have One True Calling,” 7:20.

system of declaring a major, of committing to one academic area of study for the entirety of one's college career, is built for those who know from an early age the desired trajectory of their academic and professional path.<sup>35</sup> It is suited to specialists, or those with talents and interest for one particular field.<sup>36</sup> Specialists certainly benefit from exploration outside of their field, but the average exploratory student thrives when they are permitted to break free from imposed structure, and may be deterred by the rigidity of specialization. Unfortunately for such students, our culture has a bizarre fixation with the concept of having a singular purpose, an overarching goal, a passion that will drive us from youth through old age and straight to our inevitable demise. Each of us is expected to figure out this passion as soon as possible, so we can structure our lives around it. If we don't, we'll be one of the pitiable many who work for a living, who look forward to weekends and vacations and retirement, or who end up switching careers when they're middle-aged. But for many of my students, the search for a singular passion leads to the conclusion that they have too many to choose from. Or, in some cases, students may find that they don't feel passionately about any subjects at all. And still others may have a passion, but may not have the privilege of exploring it, due to familial pressures and/or a desire to use their college degree to gain social and economic capital.

For these reasons and more, Terri Trespicio describes the notion of following a singular passion as “dangerously limiting”, indicating how it can instill a feeling of failure in those who have difficulty identifying their passion, and encourage inaction in

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35. Buford & Nestor, “The Plight of the Undecided Student.”

36. Wapnick, “Why Some of Us Don't Have One True Calling.”

those who are waiting for passion to strike.<sup>37</sup> She shares anecdotes from her own seemingly random career path, taking jobs just for the paycheck or swapping careers because something new sounded more interesting and engaging at the time, gaining new knowledge at each shift in direction that helped her to find a suitable next endeavor. Trespicio defines passion as “the full force of your attention and energy that you give to whatever is right in front of you,” and concludes by indicating that “you don’t follow your passion. Your passion follows you.”<sup>38</sup> Individuals can and should expect to have many passions over the years. I certainly have. My biggest passion in high school was acting, and if you had told me then that in a decade I would no longer be actively seeking out opportunities to be on stage, I would have been shocked.<sup>39</sup> There are days where I feel passionately about my job, and I do give it the full force of my attention and energy. And there are days where the only thing I feel passionately about is my bed, and getting a sound night’s sleep. In lieu of choosing the direction for our life based on our ever-shifting passions, Trespicio recommends that we “Spend [our] time and attention solving [our] favorite problems,” advising us to seek the point where “your energy and effort meets someone else’s need.”<sup>40</sup> I did not come to my career through a desire to solve a particular problem. But now that I have the job I have, and I see the problems my students face every day, I have added helping them resolve these issues to my growing list of passions. One of the greatest rewards associated with my job is forming

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37. Terri Trespicio, “Stop Searching for Your Passion,” Filmed September 2015, TED video, 10:48, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6MBaFL7sCb8>.

38. Trespicio, “Stop Searching for Your Passion,” 9:40 – 10:30.

39. Similarly, if I had told my younger self at any age that I’d spend the majority of the summer of 2020 passionately devouring all things related to Bollywood films, I would have had a lot of questions.

40. Trespicio, “Stop Searching for Your Passion,” 7:30.

connections with students in need, and being the (at times only) person who believes in them. Their need to be heard, and to be offered guidance on where to go next, is met by my desire to be there for them.

In my experience, students who struggle to declare their major due to a lack or abundance of passion rarely struggle to identify problems in the world, and most already wish to find ways of solving them. My students volunteer for Planned Parenthood, march in Black Lives Matter rallies, or simply (yet heroically) place the needs of their families and communities above their own. Their major need only be a stepping stone on their path to solving their favorite problems, a way to learn the hows and whys of those problems, or the means of expressing dissatisfaction, or perhaps actually effecting and implementing change, however great or small.

### **3.4 A note to my students**

So my advice to students is not to fight against your exploratory character. If you resonate with the concept of being a Multipotentialite, do not shy away from identifying as one. And find academic programs that allow you to explore more than just one of your interests and strengths. Find programs that allow for an interdisciplinary approach, or look into designing your own major. Find out how many majors and minors you are able to pursue, and take on as many as you can reasonably complete before you graduate. Or, commit to as little as possible, and spend as many credit hours as you can taking random classes that excite you.

The myth of the singular path leads many among the academically curious to limit themselves unnecessarily. If I had known that declaring my major didn't also mean

committing to what I'd be doing with my life for the next forty years, I might have studied a subject that I actually felt passionately towards. If you have a passion, it is worth pursuing. But even more worth pursuing is a way to contribute to solving the problems you see in the world, whether they be close to home or on a global scale. Trust that if you have an interest, if you are called in one direction or other, it will lead you somewhere valuable. And if you are being drawn in many directions, and therefore cultivating a unique and diverse set of skills, trust that you will find a place to utilize those skills, together or separately, to begin solving those problems that may have sparked your journey.

## **Chapter 3: Innovation, Adaptability, & the Liberal Arts**

### **4.1 Jobless on Graduation Day**

As my college graduation ceremony loomed, I felt like I was the only person I knew who didn't have a path forward. I had one friend applying to med schools, another with a job lined up with a prestigious lighting design company, and another preparing for a placement with Teach for America. I had friends who would be teaching at private high schools, friends moving abroad, even a friend going to work for Disney World. When I looked around, I seemed to be the last one to be directionless. Everyone had found a way to continue their path forward. Everyone except me, whose journey would soon be ending back at my mom's house.<sup>41</sup>

We had a class meeting in the college chapel on one of the last days of senior week. We were each handed a notecard, upon which we were expected to write where we'd be living and what we'd be doing once we'd moved off campus. I stared at the blank card for some time before grudgingly writing that I'd be moving back to Elizabethtown, New York, and working for a children's theater camp. I neglected to mention that this was only a three week gig, after which I'd be just as unemployed as I was sitting there amongst my soon to be more successful peers.

A few years earlier, when my then boyfriend was finishing his final credits and interviewing for jobs, I remember him lamenting that he had attended a liberal arts college, rather than learning a trade or pursuing Business or Engineering. "Then I'd know exactly what type of jobs would want me, and I'd have actually learned how to do them."

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41. At least my older sister had finally agreed to let me take over her old bedroom.

I was having similar thoughts as I sat in the chapel that day, mulling over every decision I'd made that had led me to this point. I questioned why I hadn't pursued education. There, too, was a clear path forward. My friends who had found jobs weren't all making direct jumps from major to career: the Teach for America friend was an Art major, and the Disney World friend had studied English and Italian. But I reasoned that they were smarter than I was, more deserving of these jobs. It never occurred to me that the real difference was that they knew where to look, and how to present their many skills in ways that employers found appealing. It was not a lack of ability or intelligence that set me behind my peers, but a lack of understanding of the value of what I had been doing for the past four years and earlier.

#### **4.2 Advising Around Career Anxieties**

After introducing the concept of a Multipotentialite, Wapnick describes how those with a broad range of interests are blessed with three "superpowers": idea synthesis, rapid learning, and adaptability. Such individuals find opportunities for innovation at the intersection of their many interests and talents. They are used to being beginners, and therefore experienced at growing their abilities quickly. And they can apply the knowledge of multiple fields to new problems.<sup>42</sup> This overlaps with the personality traits identified by Buford and Nestor,<sup>43</sup> who also specify that exploratory students are uniquely positioned to be innovators.

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42. Wapnick, "Why Some of Us Don't Have One True Calling."

43. Buford & Nestor, "The Plight of the Undecided Student."

According to Gobble, innovation lives in the liberal arts, perhaps even more so than in the STEM fields, to which innovation is more often attributed.<sup>44</sup> Gobble's definition of the liberal arts seems to mostly encompass humanities-esque subjects, which she finds to be distinct from majors related to the sciences. I would redraw these lines somewhat, to include the natural and social sciences alongside the humanities, continuing to distinguish them from more specialized academic programs that leave less room to explore outside of the major—subjects like Business and Engineering. Even with these lines drawn differently, Gobble's argument still applies: most careers to which these more specialized programs lead are also reliant on skills learned within the liberal arts. For example, liberal arts students learn the importance of creative thinking from the earliest days of their academic careers, and can in fact only be successful in their fields if they contribute through the development of original thought. The skills cultivated in a liberal arts education are more likely to be “future proof”, meaning they cannot be supplanted by artificial intelligence. And yet, the liberal arts boasts higher percentages of students with anxiety and depression than any other area of study.<sup>45</sup>

Wapnick quotes a statistic from Fast Company Magazine, which ranks adaptability as the most desirable skill in the 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce, noting how “it is the individuals and organizations that can pivot... that are really going to thrive”.<sup>46</sup> Gobble and Stebleton each consider innovation essential in careers that cannot be replaced by

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44. MaryAnne M. Gobble, “Innovation Needs the Liberal Arts,” *Research-Technology Management*, 2019, 51–53, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08956308.2019.1563439>.

45. Shaun Ajinkya, James F Schaus, and Michael Deichen, “The Relationship of Undergraduate Major and Housing with Depression in Undergraduate Students,” *Cureus*, 9, 8 (September 18, 2016): 1-9, <https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.786>.

46. Wapnick, “Why Some of Us Don't Have One True Calling,” 8:20.

automation.<sup>47 48</sup> David Deming penned a working paper in 2017 to demonstrate the growing importance of social skills in the workplace, noting that the number of social skill-intensive career opportunities has increased by nearly 12% in the last 40 years.<sup>49</sup> Oral communication was also found to be a valuable yet hard to find skillset.<sup>50</sup> Research attests to undeclared students' reliance on socialization and communication with their peers and loved ones, suggesting they too see the value in such skills and will seek to grow them if encouraged to do so.

Exploratory students demonstrate some of the most sought-after skills in the modern workforce, and should therefore have no fears about their future employment. But academic structures that do not allow them to engage with their multifaceted abilities stifle and devalue these natural inclinations. Such students would therefore benefit from the academic flexibility of a liberal arts education, where these skills can continue to be cultivated.

Unfortunately, there exists a pervasive myth in our culture, that a liberal arts degree is essentially useless. Jokes abound at the expense of Religion or Literature majors, congratulating them on their chosen career as a barista or bartender.<sup>51</sup> Politicians have been quoted discouraging majors related to the arts. And even majors in the sciences experience anxiety around their career prospects and preparedness, despite the growth of

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47. Gobble, "Innovation Needs the Liberal Arts."

48. Michael J. Stebleton, Lisa S Kaler, Kate K Diamond, and Crystal Lee, "Examining Career Readiness in a Liberal Arts Undergraduate Career Planning Course," *Journal of Employment Counseling* 57 (March 2020): 14–26, <https://doi.org/10.1002/joec.12135>.

49. David J. Deming, "The Growing Importance of Social Skills in the Labor Market," National Bureau of Economic Research, June 2017, 1–47.

50. Deming, "The Growing Importance of Social Skills in the Labor Market."

51. As if these weren't valuable positions that contribute to the functioning of our modern society... but more on that in the next chapter.

STEM-related careers in recent decades.<sup>52</sup> Schools themselves contribute to the perpetuation of this myth, at times cutting programs in the liberal arts under the guise of “streamlining”, or eliminating programs and courses that do not lead to predictable career outcomes.<sup>53</sup> It’s no wonder my students flee UVM’s College of Arts and Sciences, when their parents, community leaders, and the media are all telling them other academic units will serve them better.

Perhaps it’s due to my academic background, but I am mostly friends with people who attended liberal arts colleges and pursued careers not based on their majors, but dependent on the skills honed by their education. When students ask me “What do you do with a Sociology major?” I might tell them about my friend who majored in Sociology and now works for the Vermont Federal Credit Union. Or if they say, “I couldn’t possibly get a job if I study Classics, right?” I’m likely to bring up my former Classics major friend, who now works for a company that provides tech support for beer distributors. Or, my personal favorite: “I like English, but I don’t want to be an English teacher.” Fair enough. Then maybe you can become an academic advisor, like the former Comparative Literature major seated before you.<sup>54</sup>

In a recent appointment with a student named Anna, I found myself having to answer the questions I myself was asking immediately after earning my liberal arts

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52. Diandra J. Prescod, Melissa Dagley, Andrew P Daire, Cynthia Young, and Michael Georgiopoulos. “Exploring Negative Career Thoughts Between STEM-Declared and STEM-Interested Students,” *Journal of Employment Counseling* 55 (December 2018): 166–75, <https://doi.org/10.1002/joec.12096>.

53. Hernandez, “Chronicle of a Debt Foretold.”

54. I share this at the risk of angering those English or Comparative Literature devotees who would scoff at having the two so equated. I know, I get it, they’re not the same. But UVM doesn’t have a Comp Lit department, so I insert my own experiences where I can.

degree. I had brought up the subject of major declaration with Anna, and she told me that Psychology was currently the front runner.

“But I’m not ready to declare just yet,” she said. When I asked that she elaborate as to why, she explained, “A lot of the people I know who majored in Psych ended up in Business. So I’m wondering if I should just declare a Business major instead.”

“Do you know for certain that you want to end up in the Business world?” I asked.

“No,” Anna replied, “But if I don’t know what I want to do, doesn’t it make sense to major in something that will give me a direction?”

I remember how it felt to be in Anna’s shoes. To have found subjects worth studying, but not see how they might lead to a lucrative career. But I told Anna that Business was more specialized than most of our liberal arts majors, that she wouldn’t have as much opportunity to explore outside of her major and try new things. I shared how really, when you don’t know what it is you want to do, it makes sense to get yourself ready and able to do a lot of different things. Anna expressed relief when my commercial for the liberal arts was over. “Good,” she said, “Because I’d really rather study Psych than Business anyway.”

### **4.3 In Lieu of Passion**

Many of my students reason that, if they don’t have a particular passion, they might as well chase a guaranteed salary. As Trespicio established, our passions follow us, so who’s to say Business won’t become a passion for many of those who declare it out of a lack of better options? Lots of my undeclared students end up looking to Education,

Social Work, Nursing, Engineering, and Exercise Science—majors that they can easily link to a job. For some, it’s less about the money and more about the security that these career-oriented majors offer. BIPOC students and those from lower SES backgrounds, for example, have been found to select majors that will provide them and their families with economic stability and social capital.<sup>55</sup> Unfortunately, these majors tend to be the most specialized, and many students struggle with being unable to branch out and explore their other interests. An undeclared student might initially select a specialized major, realize it is too structured to allow them to pursue other interests, and have to make a change. This could potentially delay graduation, but if such a student were to force themselves to stick with a specialized major, they might get in the way of themselves graduating at all.<sup>56</sup>

With the increased commonality of students from all socio-economic backgrounds attending college came a decrease in the career security afforded by a Bachelor’s degree.<sup>57</sup> In her TED Talk “Why Your Major Will Never Matter,” Megan Schwab discusses how a college degree is no longer a guarantor of a lucrative career. Success post-graduation therefore becomes dependent upon a student’s choice of major. And yet polling by the American Association of Colleges and Universities found that only 19% of employers prefer applicants with a specific college major. 78% of employers indicated that they would hire from any major, as long as the applicant had the skills to do the necessary work. And 93% of employers rank creativity, critical thinking, and

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55. Ma, “Family Socioeconomic Status, Parental Involvement, and College Major Choices.”

56. Ashraf et al., “Student Motivation and Perseverance.”

57. Hernandez, “Chronicle of a Debt Foretold.”

problem solving as necessary skills valued over a particular major.<sup>58</sup> If employers care so little about college major, then why does this decision weigh so heavily on exploratory students?

The answer to this may be revealed in a study from John Robst regarding mismatching between academic major and career.<sup>59</sup> Robst found that employees in fields that were not directly related to their degrees earned less on average than employees pursuing their major-related career paths. This in turn meant that mismatched employees experienced a lower rate of return on their higher education investment. Most commonly mismatched majors were those related to the liberal arts, in particular English, foreign language, and the social sciences. Least commonly mismatched majors included Computer Science, health-related majors, Engineering, Business, and (among women) Education. At first glance, these data suggest that the myth around liberal arts-related careers being less lucrative than more specialized majors is actually true.

But Robst also found that the salary discrepancy between mismatched employees who studied in the less commonly mismatched majors were much greater than in the more commonly mismatched majors. In other words, a German major might be more likely to be mismatched than an Engineering major, but the difference in salary between a matched and a mismatched Engineering major will be far steeper than between a matched and a mismatched German major. Robst attributes this to the transferability of occupational skills learned within the liberal arts, as opposed to the highly specified skills

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58. Megan Schwab, “Why Your Major Will Never Matter,” Filmed April 2015, TED video, 13:12, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ARGkp6am3S8>.

59. John Robst, “Education and Job Match: The Relatedness of College Major and Work,” *Economics of Education Review* 26 (2007): 397–407, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2006.08.003>.

learned within Business or Engineering. This supports the advice I gave to my student Anna: if a student doesn't know for certain that they want to pursue a career that their more specialized major will funnel them into, they are better served by a less specialized liberal arts major.

#### **4.4 Articulation of Value and Narrative Building**

Those of us who already understand and appreciate the liberal arts want to believe them to be intrinsically valuable. But undeclared students may not always see it this way, particularly if they do not come from high income backgrounds. In order to attract those exploratory students who are best suited to their programs, liberal arts colleges need to be better about articulating the value of the education they offer their students. In particular, they must understand how participation in their majors can prepare students for a wide range of post-graduate career opportunities. NACE defines career readiness as “the attainment and demonstration of requisite competencies that broadly prepare college graduates for a successful transition into the workplace”.<sup>60</sup> The organization worked with educators and employers to develop eight career competencies that students can work to develop over their time in college: critical thinking and problem solving, written and oral communication, teamwork and collaboration, digital technology, leadership, professionalism and work ethic, career management, and global and intercultural fluency. Understanding the competencies allows for students to draw connections between what they have learned in their educational experiences to the skills desired by potential

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60. “What Is Career Readiness?” What is Career Readiness? NACE, Accessed April 19, 2021, <https://www.naceweb.org/career-readiness/competencies/career-readiness-defined/>.

employers, thus bridging the gap between higher education and the work force. The students benefit from this common vocabulary of skills and abilities, as do educators and employers. The former can better contextualize what is being taught in their classrooms, and the latter can effectively explain what it is they are looking for. The language of these core competencies allows students to explore their interests across disciplines, while offering a way to demonstrate those interests' coherence to one another.

I've often utilized the NACE career competencies in my conversations with undeclared students. When they question the value of a certain class, I encourage them to consider which competencies the class is helping them to develop. If they question the need for a foreign language course, for example, I'd help them to identify the growth of their global and intercultural fluency, as well as written and oral communication. When they're truly uncertain of a major, I ask them to consider which of the competencies they value, which they already see as skills of theirs, and which they'd like to grow further. A student who values critical thinking and problem solving but wants to improve their teamwork and collaboration skills might do well studying in a lab environment, where they are often asked to work in groups or pairs to achieve a common goal. Students greatly benefit from having concrete language to describe what they are learning and what they want to learn.

Nicholas seeks to advocate that the successful articulation of the value of the liberal arts is vital to the survival of the discipline.<sup>61</sup> She interviewed 32 students within

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61. Jennifer M. Nicholas, "Marketable Selves: Making Sense of Employability as a Liberal Arts Undergraduate," *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 109 (2018): 1–13, <https://doi.org/doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2018.09.001>.

the liberal arts majors of a large, state-affiliated university, identifying several consistent themes. The first of these was the importance of building a narrative, of developing a sense of cohesion and futurity in relationship to liberal arts students' broad academic backgrounds and interests. Study participants understood that their experiences would not necessarily speak for themselves, so they had to carefully consider how best to craft a story to demonstrate their success. The broadness of the liberal arts departments meant students had to draw upon elements of their personal narrative that made them unique, such as their choice in co-curricular activities. In addition to their academic accolades, students had to learn to distinguish themselves by drawing connections to their experiences outside of the classroom. This practice was a vital component of demonstrating their employability. Exploratory students, with their drive to set themselves apart from specialized departmental structures and forge unique paths, will likely benefit from learning these narrative construction techniques. In doing so, they see how their education has had structure, without necessarily needing to commit to one singular professional path. An intricate and individualized degree can still have concrete outcomes, while maintaining the flexibility on which exploratory students tend to thrive.

Stebbleton et al drew similar conclusions to Nicholas after assessing NACE career competencies in students who had completed a liberal arts specific career readiness course.<sup>62</sup> They found that liberal arts students were typically unfamiliar with the purpose behind their education, and were therefore likely to ascribe to a belief in their own lack of practical skills. Several shared that never before had any university personnel discussed

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62. Stebleton et al., "Examining Career Readiness in a Liberal Arts Undergraduate Career Planning Course."

with them how their education would benefit them in the workforce. Understanding the NACE career competencies helped study participants to craft a narrative unique to their experiences, and practice setting themselves apart from competition. Exploratory students are particularly susceptible to commentary suggesting that their academic path is leading them nowhere. Many students expressed a sense of uncertainty regarding their future, often established based on comments from loved ones about the futility of studying the liberal arts.<sup>63 64</sup> As long as the myth that liberal arts majors do not lead to lucrative career outcomes persists, exploratory students will be vulnerable to pressures that direct them away from the broad-based, flexible majors that their personalities are naturally drawn to.

#### **4.5 Privilege in the Liberal Arts**

It must be noted that there is an inherent elitism to the liberal arts. Before the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century, higher education always referred to a liberal arts education, and was enjoyed only by upper-class Americans. After WWII, as it became more common for lower- and middle-class Americans to pursue a college degree, the liberal arts was still more commonplace at elite private institutions.<sup>65</sup> We have seen how students from low income backgrounds tend to be more likely than their more privileged peers to select majors with predictable career outcomes.<sup>66</sup> As Ma notes, “students from lower SES families consider higher education more as an instrumental means for achieving upward

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63. Buford & Nestor, “The Plight of the Undecided Student.”

64. Nicholas, “Marketable Selves.”

65. Hernandez, “Chronicle of a Debt Foretold.”

66. Ma, “Family Socioeconomic Status, Parental Involvement, and College Major Choices.”

social mobility and economic security.”<sup>67</sup> Many of us who selected liberal arts programs and majors must recognize that we came from a privileged background that allowed us to see higher education as an opportunity for personal growth first, and economic growth second (if at all).

I was recently working with a first generation student of color, Brienne, who shared with me that she wanted to pursue a major in Computer Science. “My Computer Science course this semester is the hardest class I’ve taken yet in college,” she explained, “but I think I’m up to the challenge.” Brienne also disclosed that she wanted to minor in Philosophy, and would only need two more courses to complete the minor.

Brienne has another advisor, who later messaged me in shock that Brienne was not planning to major in Philosophy. “If she’s so close to the minor after just her first year, and she likes it enough to keep taking classes, why isn’t she majoring in it?” I agreed with this at the time, but now I feel I have a slightly better understanding of Brienne’s motivations. Philosophy is not a major with a predictable career path, whereas Computer Science has a very clear and lucrative trajectory. I do not know the extent to which Brienne’s intersecting identities contributed to her choice of Computer Science over Philosophy, and wonder how comfortable she would have been sharing these with me, a white woman, whose past loud proclamations in support of humanities subjects may have hinted at my additional privileges. But Brienne is clearly another Multipotentialite, and therefore will benefit from studying in a broad range of fields. The combination of Philosophy and Computer Science as a double major may be the subject

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67. Ma, 223.

of our next appointment, which would afford her the security of a predictable career path as well as the adaptability of the liberal arts.

#### **4.6 A note to my students**

I hope my students realize that I do understand their hesitation to pursue the liberal arts. With so many voices perpetuating the myth that liberal arts students are unemployable, and with unpredictable career outcomes after graduation, it's easy to begin to see the degree as useless. But if you are a Multipotentialite, if you are an adaptive innovator who wants to prepare yourself for a broad range of post-college careers, or if you have no idea what it is you want to do with your life, the flexibility of the liberal arts may be exactly what you need in order to be successful. You may not have had the opportunity to learn the value of the liberal arts, but doing so will help you to attest to that value in conversations with future employers. As hard as it may be, I discourage you from listening to those voices, whether they belong to friends, family, community members, or the media.

At times I do find myself working with a true specialist, someone who really does have a singular passion and who can't envision themselves being happy in any other field. I applaud you if you identify as such, regardless of whether or not the field you choose is in the liberal arts. But for those who are less certain, hesitant to commit, and determined to embrace a broad range of skills, I will assert that the liberal arts should be your home. Belief in the liberal arts is really the belief in one's self: if you trust that you are doing good work, that you are learning what is right for you to be learning in a given

moment in time, then you will inevitably find a gap in the world that can only be filled by your unique expertise.

## **Chapter 4: Why We Work**

### **5.1 My Unreal Retail Job**

The fall following my graduation from Hamilton, I was no more certain of a career path than I had been on the day I walked across the stage and received my diploma. I'd finished my summer job, and began to question what I should do next. Because it felt vital to move out of my mom's house and establish myself somewhere new, and because I had always liked visiting Burlington while I was growing up, I decided to find a job that would allow me to move across Lake Champlain. I still didn't have a *what* to do with my life, but it felt good to have a *where*.

I got a job selling shoes for a small, family-owned company called Danform Shoes. The location where I worked was right on Church Street, Burlington's four block pedestrian market, one of the staples of the city's culture. I liked being in the heart of town, at times selling thousands of dollars' worth of merchandise in one day, and learning about various foot ailments and shoe designs for alleviating them. I met one of my best friends working for Danform, and valued the relationships I forged with all of my coworkers. But in spite of all of these reasons to be happy in the work I was doing, there was an underlying feeling of embarrassment that I did not have a *real* job.

I didn't know then what it was about my retail job that made it less than real. But everyone I shared this with immediately understood what I was saying. If I told anyone, "I don't mind working in a shoe store, but I can't wait to have a real job," they would automatically agree and encourage this way of thinking. No one ever asked me why I thought my retail job wasn't real, let alone tried to convince me that I had a real job already.

It was a fairly regular occurrence to see people that I knew shopping at Danform—former teachers, classmates, and friends of my parents would often stroll in off the street, do a double take when they recognized me, and take the opportunity to catch up. I always hated these conversations. Perhaps it was just my imagination, but the smiles of these people who had known me previously never quite met their eyes. Instead, there was something like disappointment in the expressions of my former teachers, something that mocked me in the glances of my former classmates, and disdain in the voices of my parents’ friends. I was often asked what *else* I was doing—was I still in school? Working in a second more real job? Was I still acting? Singing? Writing? Every time I answered each of these questions with a no, a shrug, and a half smile, I felt my humiliation at my lack of a real job grow.

## 5.2 Real Jobs & Real Majors

Schwab describes how the question “what do you want to be when you grow up” gets distorted and redefined over the course of our growing years. When we’re children, we may be told that dreams are worth striving for, the stars are worth reaching for, anything is possible if we set our minds to it. But as we move up through school, the adults in our lives begin to introduce caveats: you must earn the right grades, pass the right tests, and meet the right set of expectations.<sup>68 69</sup> We’re eventually told that we have to go to college, in order to earn a “real job”. What makes a job real or not depends on

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68. Schwab, “Why Your Major Will Never Matter.”

69. I would add to Schwab’s list that you must also ascribe to the right beliefs, come from the right family background, and have the right outward appearance.

different criteria for different people, but Schwab found five largely overarching elements, of which you need at least four in order for your job to be considered real: an education beyond high school, a set schedule, business casual or formal work attire, a boss, and getting paid well above minimum wage.<sup>70</sup>

I had a boss at my retail job, and earned a decent enough wage to live comfortably, but I wasn't using my bachelor's. I didn't have a set schedule. And I wore jeans and sweaters most days. Anyone who walked through the doors of the store knew immediately that I didn't have a real job. They didn't need to know my salary, my major, or my schedule in order to classify me as less than real. And I was often treated as such.

There is a startling amount of privilege that goes along with this distinction between real jobs and the rest. There's no counterpart term to the real job classification: other jobs aren't fake, they aren't imaginary, and they are vital to our communities. The people who stock our grocery stores, who build and repair our infrastructure, who serve us in restaurants, who care for our ailing loved ones, none of these people have real jobs according to Schwab's definition, or my own while I worked for Danform. We sap workers in these positions of their right to be proud of the work they do, by defining their work as inferior to that which is real. And students dread having to spend any amount of time at a job that is not real, and instead seek out the academic opportunities that they see as guaranteeing them a real job immediately after graduation.

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70. Schwab notes that this last piece of the real job puzzle is the most important, and can negate the need for any of the other pieces. If you get paid well enough to do it, any job is a real job. Which is why Tom Hanks, LeBron James, and Beyoncé all have real jobs, but aspiring actors, athletes, and singers are not granted this accolade.

Financial security is a constant source of stress for my students, and rightly so, given the potential graduation delays that undeclared students are, in some instances, more likely to experience compared to their declared peers.<sup>71</sup> I regularly have conversations with students who are weighing the pros and cons of taking time away from school. Should they keep spending their and/or their family's money in order to earn their degree sooner? Or should they pursue other non-academic exploratory opportunities that are less costly until they are more certain of a direction in life? Undeclared students are not alone in their desire to get the most bang for their buck when it comes to their education. All college students who anticipate graduating in debt (69% according to Lendingtree.com<sup>72</sup>) want to be sure they will be able to pay off that debt with their post-graduation careers as soon as possible, so that they can eventually direct their hard-earned paychecks towards their futures, not their pasts.

But if financial security is a primary motivating factor behind major declaration, why do students feel the need to invest in an education at all? Schwab notes how a college education is no longer a guarantor of a real job, quipping that this means certain members of her audience may be contemplating their future careers as Starbucks baristas. She equates this career with being “doomed to a life of underemployment”.<sup>73</sup> Starbucks baristas make, on average \$12/hour, or ~\$24,000/year,<sup>74</sup> well below the national average

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71. Ashraf et al., “Student Motivation and Perseverance.”

72. “U.S. Student Loan Debt Statistics for 2021,” Student Loan Hero. Lendingtree.com, January 27, 2021, <https://studentloanhero.com/student-loan-debt-statistics/#:~:text=A%20Look%20at%20the%20Shocking%20Student%20Loan%20Debt%20Statistics%20for%202021&text=It's%202021%2C%20and%20Americans%20are,both%20private%20and%20federal%20debt>.

73. Schwab, “Why Your Major Will Never Matter.”

74. “How Much Do Starbucks Barista Jobs Pay per Hour in 2021?” ZipRecruiter, Zip Recruiter, Accessed April 28, 2021. <https://www.ziprecruiter.com/Salaries/Starbucks-Barista-Salary-per-Hour>.

of ~\$31,000/year.<sup>75</sup> But they also receive health, dental, and vision insurance, generous parental leave options, a 401(k) with employer contributions, and stock purchase options. Starbucks even pays for their employees (referred to as “partners”) to earn their Bachelor’s degree from Arizona State University.<sup>76</sup> Baristas who become managers in training can expect their annual income to increase by \$10,000, and full-fledged managers make ~\$45,000/year. The only preferred qualification for these positions is a high school diploma or GED, and two years of relevant retail experience. Trader Joe’s, too, offers comprehensive benefits packages to their employees (or “crew members”). Starting positions (or “mates) make ~\$13/hour, while also receiving health, dental, and vision insurance and a 401(k) with employer contributions.<sup>77</sup> 75% of crew members in management positions began as mates, and managers can earn up to \$73,000/year.<sup>78</sup> The company also increases salaries by an average of 7-10% annually for all crew members, based on performance reviews.<sup>79</sup>

I make less in my job as an advisor than I would as a manager for either of these retail locations, a job which I am overly qualified to do. So, why don’t I quit and apply for a job at one of the locations near my home? I would receive a comparable benefits

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75. “United States of America,” United States of America - Place Explorer - Data Commons, Data Commons, Accessed April 28, 2021, [https://datacommons.org/place/country/USA?utm\\_medium=explore&prop=income&popt=Person&cpv=age%2CYears15Onwards&hl=en](https://datacommons.org/place/country/USA?utm_medium=explore&prop=income&popt=Person&cpv=age%2CYears15Onwards&hl=en).

76. “Benefits and Perks,” Starbucks Coffee Company. Starbucks, Accessed April 28, 2021. <https://www.starbucks.com/careers/working-at-starbucks/benefits-and-perks>.

77. “Careers,” Trader Joe’s, Trader Joe’s, Accessed April 28, 2021. <https://www.traderjoes.com/careers>.

78. “Trader Joe’s,” How much do Trader Joe’s Retail jobs pay? | Indeed.com, Trader Joe’s, Accessed April 28, 2021. [https://www.indeed.com/cmp/Trader-Joe's/salaries?job\\_category=retail#:~:text=Average%20Trader%20Joe's%20hourly%20pay.per%20year%20for%20Store%20Manager](https://www.indeed.com/cmp/Trader-Joe's/salaries?job_category=retail#:~:text=Average%20Trader%20Joe's%20hourly%20pay.per%20year%20for%20Store%20Manager).

79. Trader Joe’s, “Careers.”

package, and while there may be less room for upward mobility, I would also likely experience less workplace stress. So, why haven't I quit yet and submitted applications? Why, if I advised my students to drop out and pursue similar opportunities, would they scoff at such a suggestion and continue their education at great financial cost, as I know the majority of them would?

Even though my students often quote financial stability as their primary motivation for pursuing a certain major, most of them hope to end up in a career that offers them social capital as well. And for that, they need what society defines as a real job. But each student (not to mention each of their family members) may have slightly different criteria for what makes a job real or not, and many hope to reap intrinsic as well as extrinsic rewards. When students are encouraged to reflect upon what is real to them, they come to better understand their values, beyond economic gains. Economic gains are value enough in and of themselves, but many majors will lead to lucrative career outcomes, even if they don't have an obvious professional trajectory. And any student who desires success will be most likely to achieve it if they declare a major that suits their values, interests, and skills. When they reflect upon the nature of their major-related motivations, students become more adept at selecting a major that affords them opportunities for academic exploration, while also providing them with a sense of direction and future security.

### **5.3 The Privilege (and Danger) of Doing What You Love**

It is the expectation in our society that we will commit ourselves to one field, about which we should feel some kind of passion. This concept is closely linked to a

phrase which most Americans have heard and aspire to: “do what you love, and you’ll never work a day in your life.” But this philosophy, which Miya Tokumitsu refers to as DWYL, devalues certain careers based on arbitrary social prestige. It is, according to Tokumitsu, elitism in the guise of “noble self-betterment”, and “leads not to salvation but to the devaluation of actual work—and more importantly, the dehumanization of the vast majority of laborers”.<sup>80</sup> This is exactly what the concept of a real job does: creates a faction of the workforce that is expected to feel proud of its work already, and one that is expected to be striving for more. The DWYL philosophy implies that if we are passionate about our work, then it is no longer actually work, and lack of passion is to blame for insufficient compensation. Work is done to the advantage of the self, not the marketplace. Therefore, as Tokumitsu observes, “labor that is done out of motives or needs other than love—which is, in fact, most labor—is erased... unlovable but socially necessary work is banished from our consciousness”.<sup>81</sup>

What we see playing out in Schwab’s observations about real jobs, in Tokumitsu’s criticism of DWYL, and in my own undervaluing of a very valid job working retail, is privilege. Having a singular passion is a privilege in and of its self, let alone being able to follow it. If our passion doesn’t shine a light upon a clear path to a real job, we may not have the privilege of familial support and/or the financial means of following it. As Tokumitsu observes, “being able to choose a career primarily for

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80. Maya Tokumitsu, “Stop Saying ‘Do What You Love, Love What You Do.’ It Devalues Actual Work,” Slate Magazine, Slate, January 16, 2014, <https://slate.com/technology/2014/01/do-what-you-love-love-what-you-do-an-omnipresent-mantra-thats-bad-for-work-and-workers.html>.

81. Tokumitsu, p. 15

personal reward is... a sign of socioeconomic class”.<sup>82</sup> The choice of a career (or a major, for that matter) based on its intrinsic value is a distinctly upper- and middle-class notion. Those from lower-SES or racially marginalized communities are more likely to feel pressured to decide on a path based on its likelihood to afford them upward social and economic mobility.

Tokumitsu draws a distinction between lovable and unlovable work, the former tending to be more “creative, intellectual, [and] socially prestigious” while the latter encompasses that which is seen as “repetitive, unintellectual, [and] undistinguished”.<sup>83</sup> Schwab’s definition of a real job is based more on tangible outcomes, but the two are equitable in that real jobs will tend to be more deserving of love by societal standards. It’s easy to imagine that a journalist, an entrepreneur, or indeed an academic advisor would love their work. It’s less easy to picture a barista, janitor, or manual laborer listing love of the job as one of the reasons to make their morning commute. This is not to say that societally-defined unlovable work never allows for creativity, joy, or fulfillment. But a lack of autonomy in such positions makes these outcomes harder to achieve.

The DWYL philosophy also implies that job love should be compensation enough. Tokumitsu observes that this narrative has a disproportionate impact on women, who “comprise the majority of the low-wage or unpaid workforce... Women are supposed to do work because they are natural nurturers and are eager to please; after all, they’ve been doing uncompensated child care, elder care, and housework since time

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82. Tokumitsu, p. 18

83. Tokumitsu, p. 14

immemorial”.<sup>84</sup> Studies have shown that female-identifying students from all backgrounds are more likely than male-identifying students to seek out career paths with clear intrinsic value, and the undervaluing of such work means that women (and particularly women of color) are consistently undercompensated.<sup>85</sup> I have so far found this trend among female-identifying students to be true. I recently had a student tell me she thought she’d make a good social worker, but because she didn’t see that career path as being particularly lucrative, she had chosen to transfer into the Business program instead. She also wanted to minor in Gender, Sexuality, and Women’s Studies, and had set for herself the goal of contributing to the narrowing of the gender wage gap. I admire her for this vision, but also feel for the field of social work and its loss of such a bright and determined young mind.

Tokumitsu calls on readers to ask themselves who benefits from the DWYL philosophy, from a willingness for individuals to work for less because they love their work, or because their work is deemed unlovable. It’s certainly not the workers themselves. “If we acknowledged all of our work as work,” she writes, “we could set appropriate limits for it, demanding fair compensation and humane schedules that allow for family and leisure time”.<sup>86</sup> As long as the DWYL philosophy is perpetuated, and as long as the idea that a job can be real or not continues to influence young people’s selection of a career path, the majority of the workforce will continue to be undercompensated.

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84. Tokumitsu, p. 30

85. Ma, “Family Socioeconomic Status, Parental Involvement, and College Major Choices.”

86. Tokumitsu, “Stop Saying ‘Do What You Love, Love What You Do.’” p. 31 - 32

## 5.4 Self-Reflection

Students need to be encouraged to reflect on the motivations for their future-oriented decisions. Why might they have chosen their major? Perhaps because they find it genuinely interesting and feel that it will help them to grow skills that they value, or perhaps because they see it as leading them to a lucrative career. I don't judge my students for making such a choice, particularly those who opt for the latter due to generations-deep trauma stemming from socioeconomic struggle. On an individual scale, such students are following Trespicio's advice, and seeking to solve problems with their selected path. But for those who seek extrinsic reward purely for the sake of extrinsic reward, it does make me wonder why they have chosen to come to college in the first place. Do they genuinely desire academic engagement and the advancement of their intellectual abilities? Or is this just the next step after high school, per society's expectations? To be clear, I'm not advocating that fewer students attend college. That would end up making my career far less lucrative, and potentially entirely irrelevant. But when students understand why they are in college, why they are spending so much money on a higher education, I believe they are more likely to be successful. Ashraf et al cautions against unsuitable major changes.<sup>87</sup> Choosing a major based on its potential to earn a high-paying salary alone can end up landing a student in an unsuitable major, which is likely to cause fiscally detrimental setbacks.

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87. Ashraf et al., "Student Motivation and Perseverance."

My student Dan exemplifies this. Dan has had first-year standing at UVM for two years now, and as such is one of a limited number of my original Undeclared cohort who I still advise. Dan and I didn't meet until his second semester, and it was his poor performance in his first that brought him to my office. His first semester course load had been fairly random, but he shared with me that he aspired to transfer into the College of Engineering. We went over requirements, and I encouraged him to consider registering for a lower number of credits in order to focus on the intensive coursework required to achieve this goal. "I have faith that you can do this," I told him, "But you're going to have to work much harder than you did in the fall." We also discussed utilization of various academic supports, such as the University's tutoring center, and secured Dan disability accommodations from Student Accessibility Services.

Whether because of an actual inability to grasp the material in his more STEM-intensive coursework, or (perhaps more likely) because his second semester was interrupted by a global pandemic, Dan ended up doing worse in the fall than in the spring. He ended the semester with a 4.0, thanks to an A in one course. The rest he did not complete, and therefore was withdrawn. Due to his low grades in his first semester and lack of engagement with his second, he began what should have been his sophomore year with one semester's worth of completed credits.

Dan was still determined to transfer into Engineering, so we looked into having him repeat some of the courses he'd attempted the previous spring. But he shared with me that he didn't look forward to his Engineering courses, and wanted to take something he'd enjoy as an elective. He chose two Studio Art courses. At the end of the semester, despite utilizing the academic supports we had secured for him, Dan had once more

failed or withdrawn from his Engineering-related courses. But he had averaged an A- in the art classes. As we chose his classes for the spring, he looked at the requirements for a Studio Art major, which he is now on the brink of declaring.

I'm proud of Dan for finding a path that suits him, but disappointed that his determination to pursue an ill-fitting major has rendered him a full year behind where he should be in progress towards completing his degree. Dan isn't to blame for this—he tried, he took advantage of academic supports, but he found himself to be better suited to Studio Art, a subject he had a natural inclination towards and an eagerness to learn more about. This was no doubt a valuable learning experience, but one that comes at great financial cost. Dan had a scholarship when he began at UVM, which he then lost due to his poor academic performance. He will no doubt graduate in debt. When I asked him to reflect on what types of classes he would most enjoy, what subject he would most excel in, the answer was not his hoped for major. I wish I had asked him to consider sooner why he wasn't taking Art classes from the start. Early conversations with Dan suggested to me that the motivations behind Engineering were parental pressure and financial security. His initial major selection has ended up costing him and his family thousands of dollars. If Dan's "why" for coming to college was making money, reflection might have allowed him to avoid wasting it.

If more students engaged in such reflective practices, if they chose to be successful in what they are drawn to rather than seeking out the highest paying jobs possible, they would likely end up costing themselves less in the long run. If Dan's family questioned his ability to earn a real job with an Art major, perhaps I could have helped him to see the hypocrisy of this question: even if we set aside the fact that there

are many lucrative career paths for which an Art major would prepare Dan, he has selected a major he loves, which the DWYL philosophy tells us is more important than being adequately compensated. And if his parents disagreed, if they encouraged him to value compensation over love, he could point out that a Bachelor's degree with a major in Art over-qualifies him for certain well-paying jobs that ought to be considered real, even if they are not lovable by societal standards.

### **5.5 A note to my students**

As an advisor, I will never judge you for your motivations behind choosing a major. But if you perpetuate the myth that you can't get a real job with a major you love, be warned, I will ask if you can provide me with a definition for what a real job is. This is something I was unable to do when I was college-aged—define this concept of which I nevertheless had a too-acute awareness.

It is vital that exploratory students learn to define their own values when it comes to what makes a job feel real to them. Seeing value in all jobs means valuing all members of the workforce, which in turn means that love can be taken out of the equation at all. All work is work, and all workers deserve to be treated as if they are, in fact, contributing to the betterment of our society. If our society could actually appreciate that betterment, in all its multifaceted forms, all jobs could be considered real, and the major selection process would become a whole lot more straightforward.

## **Chapter 5: Experiential Learning**

### **6.1 Trying, Failing, Learning, Reassessing**

Two years after graduating from college, I was no closer to knowing what I wanted to do with my life than I had been on that day in the chapel. After working at Danform for a year, my then boyfriend and I decided to move to Atlanta, where we both attempted to make a living in the film industry. I managed to earn a few paychecks doing stand-in and extra work, but really the experience only served to teach me that I was not, in fact, cut out for the life of a struggling actress. I moved back home in the spring of 2016, and began to pursue a new vision: teaching.

The idea of teaching English to middle school students had always been at the back of my mind, so with no other promising prospects before me, I decided to give it a go. I applied and was accepted to a grad school program in Upstate New York, subbed a few times for my old high school, and felt confident I might have finally found my passion.

After my second day of classes, I had my very first panic attack.

I realized, almost immediately after starting my program, that I had made yet another mistake. I couldn't say exactly why, but I knew in my bones that teaching wasn't the path for me after all. And the feeling only intensified as the weeks progressed. I felt like I was suffocating. I left class each day with a longer and longer list of reasons I didn't want to teach: the restrictive nature of the Common Core curriculum, the likelihood that I'd work in an underserved district and have to pay for my own school supplies out of pocket, the grueling and dull work of writing lesson plans... none of it

appealed to me, and all of it contributed to the slow shattering of my vision. I spoke to my advisor, and together we determined that it would be best if I took a semester off.

I never returned to the program, or to the idea of teaching as a potential career trajectory. Once more directionless, I returned to Burlington, returned to Danform, and sought for myself a new path.

Yet I regret neither my experience living in Atlanta nor my attempt at becoming a teacher. Just as my many majors in college each taught me a valuable lesson (even if that lesson was just that a particular major was an ill fit), each job helped me learn a little more about what I wanted from life and from a career. My summers as a musical director for a theater camp taught me that I loved working with people, and I loved teaching, but not necessarily in a traditional sense. Danform taught me that I was good at solving problems, at listening to what people needed and helping them arrive at a solution. Atlanta taught me that I craved both variety and consistency, a balance of the new and familiar. And my teaching program taught me that the educational system in our country was flawed, and led me to consider for the first time that there might actually be a problem in the world that I could contribute to fixing.

When I ask a student what they want to major in, I never pressure them to give me a specific answer. I say, “However vague or broad it might be, what is your vision for your college career?” Inevitably, if they don’t know the answer, they will tell me that part of the difficulty in selecting a major is that they haven’t yet decided on a future career. No matter how much I assure them that declaring a major is not the same as declaring a forty year career plan, my students always seem to see it that way. And so I try to articulate how much they will learn outside of their major, not just from their other

courses, but from the activities they engage with outside of the classroom. Jobs, internships, clubs, athletics, conversations with their friends over dinner, all of these and more play a part in who they will become and what they will choose to do.

It can be easy to miss the ways in which our non-academic pursuits shape who we are becoming in the midst of an academic program. But there is something to be gleaned from everything we do. And the most successful individuals, the ones who are most adept at setting themselves apart from the crowd, will be those who understand how to weave these seemingly unrelated strands together to form a tapestry.

## **6.2 Experience as Education**

John Dewey writes of experiential learning as a vital component to a progressive education. He compares the imposing, oppressive, and fixed nature of traditional educational systems with ones that leave room for the learner to draw inspiration from their individuality: “to learning from texts and teachers [is opposed] learning through experience... to preparation for a more or less remote future is opposed making the most of the opportunities of present life; to static aims and materials is opposed acquaintance with a changing world.”<sup>88</sup> Dewey saw experience and education as inextricably connected, forming a bond which allowed students to apply the established wisdom of the past to the ever changing present.

Workman’s study of Undeclared sophomores revealed that students may not realize just how much there is to be learned from their experiences, or how their choice of

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88. John Dewey, *Experience in Education*. Macmillan, 1938.

co-curricular activities can indicate their suitability to various career paths.<sup>89</sup> But as these are the students who are least certain of their direction in life, who are often Multipotentialites and therefore drawing from a diverse range of skills and interests, exploratory students perhaps benefit from an understanding of the value of their experiences more than anyone else. Their journey to declaring their major is in and of itself an experience that is likely to set them apart from their peers. Each student who chooses to begin college without a major may have a slightly different reason for doing so. Even with these reasons in common, each student will have different subjects that they hope to test out before having to declare, or will have a different approach to structuring their exploration. Similarly, students who begin college declared but change their minds will each do so at different times, for different reasons. In every instance, their reasons and timing for declaring or undeclaring will be dictated by their values, their family's values, their background, and will help them to better understand what they hope to get out of their educational opportunities. This was certainly the case for me in my pre- and post-collegiate exploration. This improved sense of self is an important learning outcome, and also aids exploratory students in crafting the narrative that may land them a suitable job after they graduate.

Experiential learning is particularly vital in the liberal arts. Students in these disciplines need to have the opportunity to develop the established wisdom being instilled by their faculty and apply it to their individual, present-day circumstances. Only then do they see the value in what they are being taught. Vivian, one of my former advisees,

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89. Workman, "Exploratory Students' Experiences With First-Year Academic Advising."

embodied this in her journey to declaring her major. Vivian, like most of my students, struggled to narrow down her broad range of interests to one particular field. She had enjoyed her History courses the most, but (despite my best efforts to assist her), couldn't see a relationship between History and the skills valued in the workforce.

Vivian was exceptionally bright, and was hired by the University Tutoring Center to provide general study skills tutoring to her peers. In one of her early tutoring appointments, she met with a student who was struggling to keep track of the complex concepts they were learning in a STEM-heavy curriculum. Vivian had always been gifted in the sciences, but found that the methods she had developed in her History courses to keep track of dates, places, names, and relevant contributions ended up being most beneficial to this particular tutee. Vivian's experience not only gave her a new perspective on the validity of the skills she was learning in her History courses, but helped her decide to major in Secondary Education with a focus in History, so she could continue to help others understand the applicability of these skills. Vivian recently asked me to provide her with a letter of recommendation for a summer internship, and I had the pleasure of reading her personal statement. She eloquently detailed how her coursework in History helped her to reflect upon the implications past decisions have upon the future. Her experiences helped her to better appreciate her education, and her education taught her to contextualize and reflect upon her experiences.

Participants in Nicholas's study often indicated their belief that their degree would not be enough to bring about employment. What was needed alongside their

degree were work experiences and participation in co-curricular activities.<sup>90</sup> Stebleton reported similar findings, noting that while all fields value experiential opportunity, it just might look a little different in the liberal arts because it's often happening outside the classroom.<sup>91</sup> I would add that it's not necessarily the case that there are no experiential learning opportunities within a liberal arts classroom, but rather not enough opportunities for students to reflect on how broadly applicable what they are *really* learning really is.

### 6.3 The Flaws in Experiential Learning

Dewey cautions that not all experiences are capable of being genuinely educative, and therefore education is not always a direct outcome of experience. He argues that some experiences are miseducative, and defines these as any that “has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience.”<sup>92</sup> Traditional education is an experience in and of itself, and one that can be miseducative. “How many students,” Dewey wonders, “were rendered callous to ideas, and how many lost the impetus to learn because of the way in which learning was experienced by them?”<sup>93</sup> Traditional education is by nature rigid, immovable, and oppressive. These qualities, as we have seen, are particularly unappealing to exploratory students, who crave variety, adaptability, and involvement of the self. Often when I ask a student why they don't like a particular subject, whether first studied in high school or college, their opinion is based on one

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90. Nicholas, “Marketable Selves.”

91. Stebleton et al., “Examining Career Readiness in a Liberal Arts Undergraduate Career Planning Course.”

92. Dewey, “Experience in Education,” p. 28.

93. Dewey, p. 9.

experience with one instructor. A single negative relationship to a field is enough to deter a student from ever wanting to study within that field again, for they will always be reminded of that negative relationship.

Experiences outside of the classroom can also be highly miseducative. Burrows and Northrup performed a qualitative study to determine the reason so few female college students choose to pursue engineering as a major.<sup>94</sup> Despite consistently outperforming male students in their high school STEM courses, only 18% of engineering students identify as female. The study found that major decisions were heavily dependent on a student's experience within their family. Younger and middle children were drawn to engineering far less frequently than their eldest siblings, upon whose shoulders often rested the responsibility of improving a family's financial circumstances. For this reason too, students from lower SES backgrounds were found to be more likely to select what they determined to be lucrative majors. Female students with brothers were also less likely to become engineers, while male students with sisters were more likely to pursue engineering, suggesting that mixed-gender households were more likely to enforce traditional gender roles. Female students were found to value humanitarian fields more highly than male students, and identified experiences which led them to inaccurately perceive engineering as an unhumanitarian field. Finally, the experience of seeing almost no fellow females in engineering programs as instructors or students perpetuated the cycle of females choosing STEM majors 5% of the time, while males choose STEM majors 25% of the time.

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94. Astrid K. Northrup and Andrea C Burrows, "I'm Not Good at Math," She Said: Gender and Engineering Majors," *Journal of Higher Education Theory and Practice* 20, no. 10 (2020): 123–37.

This example demonstrates just how influential experience can be: isolated incidents that make a field seem cold and emotionless, or consistent experiences in a student's home life. A female student might therefore base her decision not to declare engineering on factors that have little to do with her ability to succeed within that major. Furthermore, a female engineering student might choose to undeclare her major based on these same experiences, which could mean moving from a suitable to an unsuitable major. In fact, lots of experience-based major changes could fall into this unproductive category. It falls to advisors and professors to help contextualize experience. Experiential learning needs to be guided by an external authority, by acquaintanceship with subject matter and the ideas of the past.

At the same time as advocating that students take advantage of experiential learning opportunities, advisors must be aware that not every student will have the ability to pursue the same opportunities. Students often rely on connections through family and friends to intern or take on summer jobs in certain fields, affording them invaluable hands-on experience they can then leverage into future careers. But students from less advantaged backgrounds, particularly first generation students, are less likely to have these connections, and more likely to need to prioritize paid work over unpaid or underpaid experience. As Nicholas observes, "affluent students with the time and resources to pursue employability-enhancing experiences, such as internships and study abroad, appear more primed to leverage the benefits of their undergraduate degree than working-class counterparts."<sup>95</sup> In conversations about narrative building, privileged

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95. Nicholas, "Marketable Selves," p. 3.

students have more to bring to their narrative, a greater wealth (so to speak) of experience from which to draw. Students who are unable to pursue employability-enhancing experiences must seek value in what they have experienced, whether this be at a summer job or in a classroom or in their conversations with friends and loved ones.

Tokumitsu uses the unpaid intern as another example of the DWYL principle being used to exploit workers. Internships are often offered in the most socially desirable fields (Tokumitsu offers fashion, media, and the arts as examples), where employees are forced to accept lower wages for the social currency afforded them by their association with these fields. “Excluded from these opportunities,” Tokumitsu notes, “is the overwhelming majority of the population: those who need to work for wages.”<sup>96</sup> This then contributes to such socially desirable fields being echo chambers, where the same affluent voices are in a position to be able to work for less than what they are worth, and those voices without such privilege are not included. Advisors here can assist their students in attaining funding for their unpaid or underpaid internships. Students from underserved populations may not even realize that they have the opportunity to take advantage of such funding.

#### **6.4 A note to my students**

There is a great deal to be learned from experience, though not all of it is productive in helping exploratory students determine a direction for their education and beyond. You may need guidance in selecting the co-curricular, employment enhancing

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96. Tokumitsu, p. 28.

opportunities that will allow you to find a path. But you must also understand that the path(s) you have already traversed have shaped you. And while an internship or job in a given field is the most obvious form of experience, students can, with practice, create a narrative that demonstrates the ways in which they have benefitted from similar and perhaps more unique experiences.

Where we have been, what we have done, matters, in unexpected ways. I truly felt that I had wasted my time by attempting to earn my Master's in teaching. I'm now on the cusp of graduating with a different Master's, and was able to transfer in the credits from the first to aid in completing my current program. And even in less direct ways, the fields that I have attempted to work in have shaped me and prepared me for success in my current field. The narratives we create around what we do allow and inspire us to do more. By writing these very words, through this very narrative, I am validating the notion that understanding and sharing your story can lead you to new discoveries, and can help you to achieve your goals.

## **7. Conclusion**

More than a year after dropping out of my first Master's program, I interviewed for a job as a receptionist for UVM's College of Arts and Sciences Student Services office. I managed to spin my meandering career narrative into an effective sales pitch for myself. I explained how my humanities background made me feel passionately about helping students through their liberal arts education. I detailed how my attempt at becoming a teacher helped me understand that I wanted to be an educator in the non-traditional sense. And I described how my retail experience meant I was exceptionally patient when it came to working with difficult people. I made my interviewers see that I was the perfect candidate for the job, and two weeks later, it was mine.

I loved my new job, and I did it well. In my first performance review, my supervisor shared that she planned to begin training me to advise students, so that in a few years' time I might one day be promoted to an advising position. But only two months later, I was called into one of the Associate Dean's offices, and offered my current position as advisor to Undeclared First-Years. It would be a newly created position, and it was mine for the taking.

I was thrown head-first into advising, with nothing beyond the training I'd received sitting at our front desk answering emails and phone calls. But this was enough of a foundation to build off of. I became an expert at navigating our website, and quickly became well-versed in the early requirements for the majority of the University's majors. I told my students I knew a little about a lot, just enough superficial knowledge to help answer their basic questions about what their college lives might look like. But I would not have been successful in my job if I had waited for someone to tell me how to do it.

Because it had never existed before I took it on, no one could sit me down and prepare me for the types of conversations I'd be having day in and day out. I continue to make a good deal of the job up as I go along. As an example, each semester that I've worked in this job, I've had a different approach to advising around course registration. I'm still perfecting my approach, and I hope to have it figured out by the time I retire. I mention this to demonstrate that it is the adaptability, the innovation, and the need for creative exercises—those qualities inherent in me as a Multipotentialite—that render me well-suited to this job. And more than that, it is my experiences, those that make me relatable to my students, those same experiences I have shared through this work, that render me well-suited as well.

I addressed in the introduction of this work that my story was limited in its scope. I can only hope that it hasn't been alienatingly so. I take this opportunity to once more acknowledge that not everyone will think the way I do about success, about passions, or about the liberal arts. There is, of course, value to those more specialized majors outside of liberal arts programs, and it was never my intention to imply otherwise. These fields are particularly appropriate for specialists, and I do occasionally meet specialist students. They have a genuine passion for Business, for Nursing, for Education, for Engineering. And of course there can be specialists within the liberal arts as well—students determined to focus only on History, Studio Art, Psychology, or Chemistry. And I admire each and every one of those students. There was even a time in my life where I would have been envious of them, as I believe many of my Multipotentialite students are now.

My role within the higher education system impacts my impression of it. I studied the liberal arts, and it served me well, and so I advocate for it. I now work for a liberal

arts college, and so I assert that more students would benefit from a liberal arts education than are at present pursuing one.

I value the awareness I now have of the privilege of this viewpoint. For many reasons, not least among them socio-economic background, many will disagree with me and consider higher education particularly valuable when it leads directly to lucrative career outcomes. To those of my students who ascribe to this belief, I have one final piece of advice: develop for yourself multifaceted definitions of what it means to be successful. Find success in happiness and fulfillment, in a job well done, no matter what the job may be. For there will be times in your life when you are happy, when you are enjoying the work that you do, but you may not be making as much money as you might prefer. You can still consider yourself successful. And there may also be times when you are making as much money as you prefer, but you may not be as happy or fulfilled by the work you are doing. You can still consider yourself successful. I do not here advocate for complacency—push yourself to find work that is fulfilling and lucrative. But accept that the search may take time. There will be ups, and there most certainly will be downs. But you will be better for each of them, for each turn in your own meandering career path.

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