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Autobiography and Community: A Personal Journey

Abstract

Our personal and professional lives intersect: the story of how one young man dropped out of a doctoral program in physics to figure out what to do about the continuing problem of dropout in higher education.

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I am a child of a low-income immigrant family who, like so many immigrants, came to the United States in search of a better life for themselves and their children. I was reminded repeatedly, as so many other children of immigrant families are, that my parents did not come to the United States and work long hours to have their children not take advantage of the many opportunities the United States provided. Though my parents had little education, they understood that education was the key to a good life in America; they expected me to work hard in school and get a college education—though they had no idea what going to college entailed.

So study I did, spending long hours at the kitchen table each night doing my lessons and preparing for exams. I worked hard and did well in primary and secondary school and, in turn, in a physics program in college. But I paid a price. I became increasingly isolated from the young people in the low-income, working class community in New York City where we lived. Most of my peers did not attend college; indeed, they often did not graduate from high school.

My isolation was only magnified when I entered a doctoral program in physics in an old industrial city in upstate New York (Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy). At some point during my second year, I could no longer bear the pain of isolation. The world outside the university was on fire with change, with calls for revolution and engagement. “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.”

I decided, after much hand ringing and pangs of guilt, to drop out of my doctoral program. I joined the Peace Corps in Turkey. There I discovered the joy of community, of being a valued member of a community of people with similar ideals of service. It was a feeling that I had put off for too long to meet the expectations my parents placed on my brother and me—and the deeply emotional sense of obligation I felt and still feel to do well and make my parents proud. My joy was magnified when I was awarded a fellowship to attend an interdisciplinary program in education and social development at The University of Chicago that stressed group work and engaged scholarship in ways that reflected the ethos of the time. Many of my fellow students had also been Peace Corps volunteers. These were the heady days of the late 1960’s, with protests, sit-ins, and calls for greater equality and social justice.

As fate would have it, my advisors, C. Arnold Anderson and Mary Jean Bowman, had been asked by a staff member at the Office of Budget, Planning, and Evaluation if they had a graduate student who would like to conduct a literature review—and get paid for the work—on the impact of finances on college dropout rates. They asked me. Not surprisingly I accepted. What graduate student would turn down the opportunity to earn a little extra cash? Again, as fate would have it, as I was exploring the literature I was also a member of an advanced seminar on social and economic equality whose members

included both faculty and advanced doctoral students. One of the participants was William Spady, a doctoral student in educational sociology. During the seminar he presented a paper describing how an application of Durkheim's theory of suicide, of intellectual and social integration and the lack thereof, could be applied to the phenomenon of college dropouts. Bingo! In a flash it all made sense. I knew in a deeply personal way, in a way that no reading of literature could inform me, that he had captured something critical to understanding the forces underlying individual decisions to leave college—and the social, economic, and racial patterning of those decisions. This analysis ran counter to the prevailing view of dropping out that tended to “blame the victim”; it also shed light on the actions of institutions that perhaps unintentionally excluded many people. Community matters and one's exclusion from community underlie a range of behaviors, including those leading to college dropout. My writing and research career path was set.

Some years later as a faculty member at Syracuse University I joined a team of faculty from Penn State University and the University of Illinois, including Patrick Terenzini and Ernst Pascarella, that won a national competition to become the second National Center on Postsecondary Teaching, Learning and Assessment, funded by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education. One of the issues we sought to address was the continuing problem of dropout in higher education and what could be done to promote greater college completion.

Again, coincidence and good timing smiled on me. It was during my search for an answer to this important question that I came across the work of Barbara Leigh Smith and Jean MacGregor, co-directors of the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education at The Evergreen State College. As soon as I learned of their work in learning communities and what that work aspired to achieve, I was hooked. I organized a conference and had the opportunity to hear their voices and learn how they understood the importance of community in students' lives. Again, in a flash it all made sense! I did not have to be told. I had found a way to address the issue of dropout and my personal understanding of what that meant, while also addressing my need to capture what I understood of the power of educational community to cross the borders of subjects and disciplines and advance the critical notion that we all learn better when we learn together.

Yes, our lives are, in a deeply human sense, autobiography. How could they not be?