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All Signs Point South: A Canadian's Journey Through an American Student Affairs Graduate Program

Hung Q. Mai

The path to a career in student affairs is rarely a simple one. Aspiring professionals come into this field from many different institutional and educational backgrounds and for a myriad of reasons, but as unique as each of these individuals are, they share some similarities. Framed by literature on both general career decisions and those specific to student affairs and higher education, this article tracks the path of a Canadian student on his journey through an American graduate program. As the author approaches graduation, he reflects on the choices that led him to where he is today, the choices that will guide his next steps in the profession, and the implications those choices have for other Canadian students who wish to enter the field.

Life is About Choices

Do you ever get the feeling that you have everything figured out? It is as if all of your choices have led to this exact moment in time and that the pieces of your life have rotated, shifted, flipped, and dropped into place like a perfectly executed game of Tetris. It is a wonderful feeling until the pieces begin piling higher and faster. Sometimes the cascading pieces pile up so high and so fast that the only outcome is a catastrophic “game over.” Yet at other times, by some combination of skill, forethought, coincidence, or just plain, random luck, there is an avenue of escape that will let you clear enough blocks to give yourself a second chance.

This is the story of how I found my path to where I am today. Since arriving at this student affairs and higher education graduate program, I have learned to appreciate the value of taking the time to reflect on the path that leads one to a particular moment and where that path might lead next. I have spent just over a year and a half here and I am months away from graduating. It is time to look back on the choices that led me to where I am today, the choices that I am now

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making, and where they will lead me tomorrow.

It Is Easy to Choose When You Only Have One Choice

The step that started it all was the one I made to pursue legal studies in my junior year of high school. Law, you ask? It may seem completely unrelated, but just follow the story. A conflict in my schedule gave me only two course options, chemistry or law. I chose the latter not because I was thinking about it as a career, but because I could not balance a chemical reaction equation if my life depended on it. I had no idea what the difference was between common law and civil law. I had never even seen a copy of the *Criminal Code of Canada*. I probably would not have known what *stare decisis* meant if it was staring me in the face, but any of it, all of it, had to be better than counting valence electrons.

According to Marcia (1966), development has two distinct stages: crisis and commitment. Crises occur when an individual's values or choices are re-evaluated, the outcome of which leads to commitment to new values or choices. Marcia's model of identity development uses these two stages to come up with four distinct states:

1. Identity Diffusion: The individual may or may not have experienced a crisis, and is characterized by a lack of commitment.
2. Identity Foreclosure: The individual has not experienced a crisis, yet has made a commitment.
3. Identity Moratorium: The individual is experiencing a crisis and is engaged in an active struggle to make a commitment.
4. Identity Achievement: The individual has experienced a crisis and has made a commitment to an ideology and occupation after extensive self-examination. (p. 551)

I will admit, my career choice was not made by the greatest decision making strategy ever employed, but it made sense at the time. Instead of asking myself whether a few high school courses and reruns of *Law & Order* were enough to drive my commitment to the legal field, I jumped in headfirst because I had no other obvious option and was not bright enough to look for others. I was locked squarely into the Identity Foreclosure stage throughout the entire process of choosing a major and a university, and throughout most of the four years I spent earning my Bachelor's degree as well.

“Just Something to Think About”

My first year at university was uninspiring and built on routine; my time was divided between the lecture hall, the dining hall, the fencing piste, and my com-

puter. These activities formed the core of my existence for the year; it was not until my second year when I finally got a job at Career Services that things began to get interesting. This job opened the door to further leadership opportunities and introduced me to the person whom I would consider my mentor throughout this entire process. These two factors, exposure to student affairs work and the influence of a mentor, were noted by Taub & McEwen (2006) as primary influences in the decision to pursue student affairs as a career. Career Services was a fantastic office and I worked with some amazing people, but it was my next job that opened my eyes to a whole new world.

A dozen of us, under the direction of four senior students and Jen, the newly appointed Acting Director, formed the staff of the brand new First Year Experience Office (FYEO). Our mission, which we gladly accepted, was to implement a newly redesigned summer orientation program. We spent weeks in training getting to know each other and figuring out our roles. I spent most of my days inside answering the phone and, even though I did not have a great deal of direct contact with students, there was something about the relaxed atmosphere and the energy of the people in the office that just felt *right*. Out of all the fantastic times we had as a group that summer, the thing I remember most about the entire experience was something that was said to us on the very first day of training. Meg, the Director of the Student Academic Success Centre (SASC), came in to talk to us about why the work that we would be doing was vital to student success. She told us that it was probably too early to think about it, but that if we enjoyed our work over the next two months, that we could very well make a living at it. With that, she wished us luck and the last thing she said as she left was, “Just something to think about.”

Detour Ahead

In the midst of all of this, I was still stuck in the Identity Foreclosure stage and exploring every single law elective that sounded even remotely interesting, and quite a few that were dreadfully boring. For example, if you wanted to ship a container full of stuffed animals from Montreal to Djibouti, I could probably recite for you every legal step along the process. As if that was not enough fun, the day I finished my third year of classes, I bought LSAT test preparation books and began what seemed like endless days of studying. This led to the dénouement of my university legal career: the six-hour ordeal that was LSAT test day.

When I received my results a few weeks later, I was faced with another tough decision: was this really the path I wanted to follow? Based on factors such as my test score, my GPA, and my extracurricular involvement, I stood a reasonable chance of being admitted to the law school I wanted, but it made me ask myself the question I should have asked much earlier: was the legal field right for me? It

may have taken three years and several thousand dollars in tuition to get there, but I had finally reached Marcia's Identity Moratorium stage. I had experienced the crisis Marcia referred to and I did not like it at all. The legal studies program, however, did exactly what I wanted it to do: it helped me decide whether there was a particular area of law I could see myself practicing. The answer, as it turned out, was not something that I was expecting at all. After spending three years buried up to my eyes in the nitty-gritty of contract clauses, statutes, bills of lading, criminal convictions, and international treaties, I could not see myself practicing any of it.

If I was not going to be a lawyer, what was I going to be? All of my carefully laid plans had evaporated and I had run out of options again. The thought of entering my fourth and final year without any solid idea of what I was going to do after graduation gave me stomach-churning anxiety on a level I had never experienced before. My entire university career had been built around a choice that was no longer viable. So, I thought to myself, "this is what a life crisis feels like." But from somewhere in the back of my head, Meg's words came back to me.

All Signs Point South

"Why not?" I thought to myself. Working for the FYEO had given me the two best years at school, so why not go on to help other students make the most out of their post-secondary experience? I sat down with Jen at the start of my senior year and told her about my change in plans, asking her if she could help me through the process of choosing and applying to a graduate program in student affairs and higher education. Throughout the entire time I had worked for them, there was never any pressure from Jen or Meg to choose student affairs as a career. They had provided me with plenty of leadership opportunities and experiences in response to my interests that would broaden my exposure to the field, but never forced the issue. The advice that they both offered did have one thing in common, though; both steered me to an American graduate program. Canadian program options were never made a priority, and even if they had been, the options were limited. The National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), one of the professional associations for American student affairs professionals, lists 107 graduate programs, while the Canadian Association for College and University Student Services (CACUSS) only lists four.

I had been working with students for 3 years now, but felt the need to know why I was doing the things I was doing in my job. This practice of acting without reflection, according to McGrath (1998), is one of the many reasons Canadian students end up in American graduate programs; they want to move away from the Canadian profession's "ground[ing] in the artistry of practice" (online, para. 12) towards a praxis involving both theory and action.

Implications for Mentorship

My story is not a unique one. Though the literature on career paths has been described as “woefully inadequate” (Brown, 1987, p. 7), my journey closely follows the results of Taub & McEwen’s 2006 survey of 300 students across 24 different college student personnel/higher education graduate programs. The study does not identify students’ nationalities, but it is safe to assume that the majority of them graduated from American undergraduate institutions. Even so, my experience closely follows those of the participants of the study. The trend is that students generally do not become aware of the profession or consider it a career for themselves until late in their postsecondary experience, or even after graduation. When they do finally become aware of it, the most valuable sources of information are current professionals and involvement in student activities.

All of this raises the question of who is being mentored into this profession and the direction in which they are being pointed. In 1989, it was estimated that the majority of students enrolling in these graduate programs were White women (Task Force on Professional Preparation and Practice, 1989). It has been almost two decades since those numbers were released, so it would be beneficial to see whether strides have been made on recruiting men, particularly men of color, to the field. American statistics have indicated that racial and ethnic minority groups comprise over 21% of the general population and 17% of college students, but only 10% of student affairs administrators (Sagaria & Johnsrud, 1991, cited in Taub & McEwen, 2006). Statistics Canada has indicated that Canadian figures are comparable, with 16.2% of the general population identified as belonging to a visible minority (Statistics Canada, 2008b). Individuals of Chinese background are of particular interest, as they currently make up 3.5% of the total national population and 26% of the visible minority population (Statistics Canada, 2008a), and have been the leading source for international visa students since 2001 (AUCC, 2007).

Are these students being served by professionals who understand the culture they come from and with whom they can relate? Don’t get me wrong; as an aspiring student affairs professional, the mentorship and guidance I received was invaluable. As an Asian male, however, I would have also benefited from seeing leadership figures that reflected my own identities and hearing their struggles and triumphs. The same could be said for students of all different identities. One effort being made in the United States to ensure this is the NASPA Undergraduate Fellows Program (NUFP). Its mission is to increase “the number of persons of ethnic-minority, persons with disabilities, and/or persons who identify as LGBT in student affairs and higher education” (NASPA, 2008). To date, this program has seen over 1,000 alumni and current fellows, many of whom are currently in the field or preparing to enter it. The Canadian profession would benefit greatly

by establishing a similar program and training future professionals who are better able to respond to the needs of the changing student demographic.

“Toto, We’re Not in Toronto Anymore”

Where are aspiring professionals being led? The answer, for the majority of Canadians who wish to enter this field, is to American graduate programs. The problem, as noted by McGrath (1998), is that in a profession heavily influenced by interpersonal connections, the opportunities to network with Canadian mentors and advisors in the American system are few and far between. Aside from the relative lack of Canadian options, what are the factors that lead Canadian students to American graduate programs? Further research needs to be conducted on this question, the answers to which may help the four existing Canadian programs in their efforts to attract Canadian students and benefit American programs that have a history of enrolling a high number of Canadian students to create a more enriching experience for them.

I was not sure how I would adjust to life in the United States. I believed that the images of American life from movies, television, documentaries, and books would provide enough context for me to get by, at least for two years. I believed that I was immune to culture shock, defined by Chapdelaine and Alexitch (2004) as “the multiple demands for adjustment that individuals experience at the cognitive, behavioural, emotional, social, and physiological levels, when they relocate to another culture” (p. 168). For the first month or so, the biggest adaptation I had to make was getting used to the fact that all American currency was the same color, which was not a bad way to start.

As the program continued, however, I found myself torn between two countries and experiencing another instance of Marcia’s Identity Moratorium stage. I still have not made a firm decision about whether to remain in the U.S. and work here after graduation, or return immediately to Canada. Consequently, I find myself doing twice the work by (a) applying American concepts, theories, and examples learned in the classroom to my every day work and remaining present in the context in which I am currently immersed, and (b) attempting to make those same connections to the Canadian context where I will eventually be returning to and bringing the reflections from my Canadian experiences to the context of higher education in the United States. Sometimes I feel like I cannot figure out where any of the Tetris pieces go, but it is rewarding when I can fit the pieces together and achieve praxis.

“There’s No Place Like Home”

My journey has been a winding one, but it is by no means unique. I follow in the

footsteps of many other Canadian student affairs professionals who have gone south before me to pursue graduate education in this field, and I do not doubt that there will be others who follow in my footsteps. This is challenging in the short-term because it means that many more students will potentially face the same struggles I did in attempting to make the curriculum of an American graduate program relevant to them. It is not an impossible task and there is something of value to be gained from the critical thought involved in the process, but it does add an additional level of complexity to what can be a very hectic and demanding two years. The lesson to be learned from this experience is that students looking to enter this field by pursuing further education should do their research on graduate programs, whether American or Canadian, in order to make an informed choice that is a good personal fit.

Chris, a graduate of this program, recently shared the following with me in an interview:

The student affairs profession in Canada will [n]ever be as well served as it has been by people who have gone through the American program simply because there is yet to be an institution in Canada that really thinks critically and models praxis in its preparation of new professionals... Until we get to a point where institutions...in Canada are looking at the work that we do as a very intricate match of theoretical and practical, I think we will always have students going south of the border, and by virtue of that, we will always have professionals who will find it challenging to get back north. (personal communication, November 28, 2008)

As challenging as it has been and may continue to be for me as a professional, there is also some hope in this. There are already a number of professionals in Canada who graduated from American programs and, as more and more students pursue American graduate degrees and return, student affairs in Canada comes closer to achieving a critical mass of professionals who understand the value of praxis. I am confident that a few years from now, I will be able to close my eyes, click my heels, and be back home, working with colleagues who have experienced the ups and downs of both systems and know where to draw from both.

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