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REFLECTION

Making Meaning—HESA and Beyond

Paula M. Cogan '00

Our campuses educate our citizens. Becoming an educated citizen means learning a lot of facts and mastering techniques of reasoning. But it means something more. It means learning how to be a human being capable of love and imagination. We may continue to produce narrow citizens who have difficulty understanding people different from themselves, whose imaginations rarely venture beyond their local setting. It is all too easy for the moral imagination to become narrow in this way....But we have the opportunity to do better, and now we are beginning to seize that opportunity. That is not “political correctness”; that is the cultivation of humanity. -Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity* (1997, p. 14)

At home, at work, and beyond, as we try to mold our lives from moments of joy and sadness, excitement and quiet, success and failure, we hope to find some underlying purpose that we can name. Certainly, education has been a monumental force for me, and HESA has been a huge factor in helping me to name how it is that I and others make meaning in all of the different aspects of our lives. Yes, I learned a great deal of information that I use in my professional practice every day, but I also learned to think better, to consider others' perspectives more widely, and to form a stronger connection between heart and mind.

Before attending UVM, I had a sense that there were all sorts of ways we, as student affairs professionals, could contribute to our institutions as educators. I wasn't sure how to carry that out, but worked very hard to try. My instincts were sharp, but I knew that I was woefully uninformed, although I couldn't quite name what I needed to know. So, I struggled to work hard and put all I had into my role as an educator, sometimes with success, sometimes in vain. Looking back, it's likely that my decisions during that time could have been much more thoughtful and intentional, and there are certainly moments I would change. I was not sure what was ahead as I drove to Vermont for the first time, but I hoped to develop my instinct with information and innovation. I also hoped to find that there was not just one way to define the role of student affairs professionals and no limit to the scope of how we view ourselves as educators in our students' lives while supporting their primary academic goals.

In the first paragraph of my professional philosophy written at the end of my first semester at UVM I wrote, “I will always be committed to education as a vehicle for both scholarship and responsible citizenship and to the ability of student affairs professionals to be active learners and teachers in their students' and colleagues' lives.” I worked in residential life both before and during graduate school, and when I took a position in admissions upon graduation, many questioned why I chose to “get out of student development” and move to a small town in Pennsylvania when I clearly wanted to live in New England or the west coast and enjoy an active social life. How could I be keeping the promise I made to myself to reprioritize my life while continuing to be committed professional, affect students, and move forward in my career? I ask myself those kinds of questions quite often and with one semester of working in admissions completed in this small, quaint town I'm not sure how much closer I am to a solid answer.

Although I grew up in a rural environment, I left after high school to be an exchange student in Sweden, attended college near home, and then left again. Coming back to a rural environment in Central Pennsylvania has been an interesting change. The transition has not been easy. I moved from working just north of liberal Boston, to the even stronger liberal soul of Burlington to a very different type of conservative soul here with which I find it difficult to connect. Certainly, part of the struggle of my transition is tied to leaving my classmates, colleagues and professors, without whom my time in Vermont would never have been as full. I went into HESA as someone who had forgotten what it felt like to allow my own feelings to enter into

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dialogue, determined that everyone could separate themselves out into neat, careful spaces. I was at least certain that I could do that. My classmates challenged me from every angle and while I will always wish that Vermont was more diverse, their challenges were diverse ones, and their support in breaking through my fear to express myself was solid and inspiring. That type of support is rare, and I am thankful for it as I search and question in different aspects my life here.

Of course, I am also thankful not to have to search and question every day, as I remember wanting to run away many times during graduate school and only talk to people who had never heard of HESA. I guess it is always easier to see good from far away. However, here the cost of living is low and I have room for guests in my off campus apartment—a first in four years. The campus is beautiful and falls into the hum of a traditional buzzing world of amazing students, colleagues and faculty, for which I am quite grateful. It is truly a community in its own stead, which I am gradually entering, always smiling, but sometimes kicking and screaming just a little inside.

Although there is still a lot of uncertainty about the future, what I am sure of is that my time in Vermont affects who I am as a professional and as a person every day. In the beginning, I came in with a belief in education that only became stronger as I had the privilege of becoming more educated myself. Sitting in the classroom after five years out of it was terrifying, but once the rhythm of our class began to pulse, it was both exhilarating and exhausting. It is extremely rare to have the time to sit in a classroom and heartily discuss both philosophic and pragmatic issues so fully while working in your field every day. Now, in the motion of each week, I often wish that our class could come together as advisors and confidants the way we did with each other at UVM.

I am also sure that although I am not as involved with current students as I used to be, my position does not exclude me from the student development role. Colleges and universities have the ability to help shape human beings not only into scholars, but also into responsible and respectful citizens. Connections are made through the admissions process, in the classroom, in the residence halls, through campus involvement, in casual interaction, and through alumni. Not everyone who goes into higher education will come out a scholar, a successful businessperson, a social catalyst, or a responsible citizen, but many will. Some who have not had a direction or a sense of themselves or their community may gain one. A link may form between history and future that never existed before. A dedication to community might emerge that could change the face of a city, town, or home.

As an admissions officer, I am able to act as the link between students and their dreams of education and success, creative expression, and good, logical thinking as well as social outlets that will likely effect their lives for many years. Prospective students walk into my office, all with different lives and perspectives, pressures and stresses, talents and aspirations. Incredibly, they are willing to share their lives with me and put their dreams into the space between us, floating there, all of that vulnerable hope exposed. In those moments, I don't understand how anyone could ask me what it feels like to leave student development. After all, these are students already, aren't they? Their interaction with me may be the first that they have with their future education and I interpret our time together as an extreme privilege that I must handle with care and commitment.

As students are willing to share their lives with me, so must I be willing to listen intently to what they have to say. It is important for me to recognize that I will not connect instantly with each student or family that I meet. We may have very different ways of approaching the world. So, I must balance keeping myself engaged with keeping my preconceived notions at bay and allowing the student to shine in expressing his or her particular interest or talent, whether or not it captivates me personally, remembering that a future engineer's passion is just as full as a future writer's. This is not always easy, as there are days when I wonder if the student in front of me has any idea why he/she is there and other days when I think I am just a cog in a mammoth, slowly turning wheel. After being able to talk about my purpose every day for two years at UVM, it's a struggle to stop doing that and sometimes difficult to keep my feet firmly planted on the ground.

Then, when I am almost carried away by the wheel, invariably something happens to remind me why I have chosen to work in higher education. Recently, I began to receive emails from students I have interviewed and corresponded with who have been admitted under Early Decision this year. Their pride is palpable, and when I

see a student's name signed with the title, Bucknell, Class of 2005, I know that in some way I have been a link in this student's development. Maybe I'm not up in the middle of the night working with students in their homes away from home anymore, but I am committed to making their first interaction with that new home thoughtful and informative at the very beginning of their development into college students. Even if they walk past my office in the fall reminiscing about their interview, asking their friends if they remember this place as I often hear students doing, I'll know that I was a small part of their educational experience.

On the road this fall, I found that the hype over college admissions can be disconcerting. Students and their parents parade through fairs, school visits, and interviews, looking on with concern and wonder at the world of academia, not sure how or where they will ultimately fit in. Some high schools are lush with resources and support while others are struggling from day to day. Families can be savvy, bewildered, impatient or confident. I am stunned by the plethora of approaches to the college search as well as the pressure high school students carry around with them every day. They are concerned about their grades, extracurricular activities, athletics, and test scores, all with the prospect of the next phase of their lives looming before them. At the same time they are balancing family life, friendships, romantic relationships, and societal pressures, all of which test their limits in this challenging world. Many are living in economic straits or in a world in which they don't feel accepted or valued. As adults, we tend to minimize high school students' issues, but it is difficult to treat them as simple when we consider all of the complex aspects of their daily lives.

As I meet with students in various venues, sometimes their intentions and expectations meld with my own; they believe in education to become more connected to humanity in some way as well as to get ahead in life. Sometimes they are more pragmatic than that. Regardless, there is an understanding, whether felt and idealistic, focused and success-driven, or somewhere in between, that education is valuable and necessary to continue moving forward as best as possible. So, in moments of question and doubt, I turn to that understanding, and it rejuvenates me each time. It's not just about the numbers or the quest to attend the best school. It's about the fact that we keep the dream of what education can do for us alive in our society and we must continue to work to expand it to all of our communities and citizens.

My everyday life is hardly as inspiring as my idealistic notions. However, somehow it is a small contribution to education, which has served me well at almost every turn—something I believe in with my mind and heart—something that has taught me to hold both of those in my hands at once. Being a part of this wide community of educators, which allows me to search and move and change inside an ever expanding and shifting educational vision, makes me quite lucky. In all of the uncertainty of my life—where I live, who will come in and out of my community, what has come before and what will come next, I get to work for my passion. No matter how often I question my purpose or try to make meaning in this world, I hope never to take that for granted.

Reference

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