

Born to be a Tiger

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ELRC 7614: College Access and Choice

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September 20, 2020

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Introduction

I am an educator, but to say that I always wanted to be in education would be leaving out a portion of my story that makes me, well, me. I was blessed with parents who were able to help me succeed, in fact, they still help me today just in different ways. Both of my grandfathers were in the military, so my grandmothers did not get the opportunity to build their own careers; however, both grandmothers successfully raised five children each. My dad ended up leaving college to work in the oilfield part time, and while he was able to move from being a “roughneck” to running the company, he always made sure that my brother and I knew that we had to go to college. My mother, who was even more supportive of our college endeavors, oftentimes spoke about how she wished she had had the opportunity to obtain her degree. She had to leave after completing her first year because her parents thought it was more beneficial to help my mom’s younger brother through college since the belief was held that my mother should focus more on creating her own family instead of creating her own path.

My dad is from Louisiana, my mom was a Navy brat and moved all over the country before finishing high school in Baton Rouge. Thankfully, this was the town that brought them together and eventually became my home town. Around age five we moved closer to Lafayette where I attended Westminster Christian Academy from kindergarten through sixth grade. My mom taught preschool there as well. Then, after sixth grade came the devastating news that we were moving to Texas. Growing up in Louisiana you don’t realize how wonderful the culture is until you aren’t surrounded by it. I didn’t even know what a county was when I moved, and to this day, I’m still upset that we don’t get off for Mardi Gras in Texas. Over the years, I’ve made peace with Texas; I graduated with my Bachelors degree and worked at a private school teaching junior high and high school English before being promoted into an administrative role. During

that time I completed my masters in English literature, but by the time I completed it, my husband and I had just found out that we were expecting our miracle baby. At this point, we decided that it should step out of full time work for what was projected to be a high risk pregnancy. Thankfully, everything went great, but by the time our daughter was about a year and a half old, I was ready to be back in a classroom. I took a job as an adjunct lecturer at Sam Houston State University, where I completed my degrees, and have been teaching English 1301 and 1302 there now for a little over two years. I am not sure that I ever want to completely be out of the classroom, but I would like to be able to be in a more full-time or administrative position at some point.

College Choice Process

Deciding to attend college was never really a decision that I had to make; it had been drilled into me by my parents, teachers, and even friends. That is what came after high school, and frankly that was a relief to me at the age of eighteen because I had absolutely no idea what else I should be doing. Originally, I wanted to be a Marine Biologist and study marine mammals. In fact, I applied to a special program in New York and was one of the one hundred applicants accepted; however, my senior year of high school held some rough battles with health, and my parents wanted me to stay closer to them. I was okay with waiting a year or so to begin the program because terrible autoimmune flares and cold weather, especially when it includes water, are not the best of companions. Instead, I started my college career at a local community college. To be fair, this was a great place for me to begin. I had excellent instructors, got to baby step my way into a larger school system (I always went to a small school), and I had classes with my friends from high school. Once I completed my allotted courses at Lone Star Community College, I transferred to Sam Houston State University.

Though SHSU is a great school, it was not my first, or even my second choice. During my time at Lone Star, I fell in love, or rather fell into a deeper love with literature. I had a wonderful English professor my first semester who would always ask me if I had decided to change my major to English yet. He said that he could see me teaching literature and helping others fall in love with “old books.” After about two years, I did change my major, and in doing so said goodbye for now to the idea of going to school in New York. At that point, I was ready to move back to Louisiana and attend LSU with my childhood friends. I completed all the application and transfer paperwork and was set to go when Katrina hit. After seeing the devastation of the storm and how much good LSU did to help, I loved the idea of being a part of the Tiger Nation even more, but sadly, it also meant that my out of state tuition could not be waived, and when comparing the costs of also need housing or commuting to a close, in-state university, I just felt like I was asking too much of my parents. They were wonderful and paid for the majority of my school, and though my dad said that he would make a way for me to go, I just couldn’t rationalize the extra expense. I also wasn’t eligible for any aid because my parent’s income put them just over the mark. This is not meant as a complaint, I am extremely grateful for the hard work my parents did to help me.

Though it wasn’t my initial choice, Sam Houston was close to home and had a wonderful English department. It was there that I met my mentor and future colleague, Dr. Darci Hill. Her passion for teaching inspired me in a way that silenced all questions regarding whether or not I had chosen the correct degree. She motivated me years later to return and obtain my masters in English, and she was the one who did the ceremonial hooding when I completed the degree. Now, her office is down the hall from mine, yet I still feel like I learn something new from her every time we chat over coffee.

During my time in the graduate department at Sam Houston State, I decided to add to my Masters of Arts a minor in Higher Education Administration. When I was working at the k-12 school as the Dean of Academics, I absolutely loved being able to provide support to the teachers and students as well as creating schedules and graduation plans, and I wanted to be eligible for a leadership position. Of course a week before I graduated, I found out that I was pregnant, and decided to stay home until my daughter was a bit older. Now, she is four years old, and in the midst of a pandemic, I thought that it would be an excellent idea to transfer those courses I took into a completed, second master's degree. This time though, nothing was stopping me from going to LSU.

Connection to Course Readings

Encouraging Parents

“Parental encouragement has two dimensions. The first is motivational: parents maintain high educational expectations for their children. The second is proactive: parents become involved in school matters, discuss college plans with their children, and save for college” (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000, p.8). I can say with full certainty that my parents' influence was my greatest asset growing up, attending college, joining the workforce, and even re-entering higher education. My parents set up an account when I was born, and each year my grandparents bought savings bonds to add to what my parents were able to set aside. I knew from an early age that education was important and worth sacrificing to obtain. This being said, my parents were not wealthy; they gave up the ability to do many of things that I'm sure they would have liked to do in order to help my brother and me during our college years. They agreed to help a certain amount per semester, but we had to maintain a good GPA, and if we dropped classes, we would be responsible for paying for them the second time. Their support did not end with providing

tuition assistance though. My mom was always there to listen to my ideas or help me proofread a paper; in graduate school, she was also there to tell me that it was okay to take a break. When I started teaching junior high and high school, my parents would come to games to help me support my students, would participate in our fundraisers, or would come watch the play my drama students put on. Even now that I'm married with my own child, they have helped by keeping my daughter so I can work on this paper. Looking back, if I had not had their support, I'm not sure how college would have played out for me. I like school, so I would like to think that I would still have finished in relatively the same amount of time, but I truly don't know.

The Gap Between High School and College

To say that all high schools are created equally could not be further from reality, yet they are all supposed to produce college-ready students upon graduation. When I lived in Lafayette, I attended a school with rigorous academic standards, to be fair, they may have been too rigorous for most children; however, when I transferred to my school in Texas, I was noticeably ahead of my classmates. My original school taught me to study, to manage my time, to read effectively, but most importantly, to seek help and take the initiative in my own learning. Though I felt fairly prepared for college, many of my peers did not. I remember sitting in a history class and fellow classmates were genuinely panicking because they were required to read the book and pull important information to study as well as keep up with the notes from class. In English class, I remember the frustration of a professor as he tried to explain to a girl that her subject and verb did not agree; she responded by informing him that she did not know what a subject and verb were, much less how to make them agree. Schools had stopped teaching grammar in high school, but professors assumed that college-ready students could understand basic corrections and directions; they couldn't. "Substandard high school preparation is compounded by poor

alignment between high schools and colleges, which often creates an ‘expectations gap’ between what colleges require and what high schools produce” (Daun-Barnett et al, 2014, p. 33). I saw this gap as a college student, and I see this now as a college instructor. One of the most frustrating things in education is seeing a peer (or student) think they are not smart enough, when in reality it is only that they haven’t been taught well enough.

Community College

Castleman et al. (2015) showcased a case story about a student named Kevin. After reading about Kevin, I can see that many of his struggles are commonplace to the college students we are surrounded with at work; however, there was one portion of the story that I didn’t particularly agree with, and that was the stigma it seemed to place on community college. Now, in Kevin’s particular case, enrolling in what was depicted as a “lesser” place of higher education was seen as negative because Kevin would have continued to work full time, and the retention rates of part-time students are lesser than those who attend full-time. I can’t help but feel that community colleges are not given the recognition they deserve. When I was at Lone Star Community College, I never once felt that my education was dumbed-down or was less important than my peers who went straight into a four year university. In fact, my best friend in high school went to university her first semester, and after we compared classes and experiences with instructors, she transferred to Lone Star to complete her basics. I also see such a value in the economic logic of attending a community first, especially one that works in alignment with state universities. Because I went to a two year institution first, the money that was saved for college lasted at least a year longer than it would have otherwise. Even when considering financial help like the Pell Grant, funds can cover more than twice the educational hours at a community college than at a university. I was truly surprised by the research in the Perna & Jones (2013)

chapter by Ashley Clayton and Darris Means that showcased the low percentage of students who successfully transfer from community college to university and complete their degree. When thinking about my students now, I could see how this makes sense; however, when I attended, it felt like the perfect stepping stone for degree attainment.

Higher Education Context

One of the theories involving college choice included in Perna's model involves the role the educational institutions themselves play in either aiding or deterring a student from applying and attending a specific college. "Some students may have a limited viewpoint on college options and may only be aware of institutions within a close proximity to their home or have highly publicized athletic teams" (Perna & Jones, 2013, p. 26). When I apply this to my own college choice, I'm not entirely certain that it wasn't that I wasn't aware of other colleges, but rather if I were to go to a state school it made more sense to go to the one with a reasonable commute and not have to spend all the extra money on housing. It was this reality that caused me to finish at Sam Houston State instead of Louisiana State. I did enjoy my time at Sam Houston, I had wonderful teachers, but I never really was inspired to get involved in anything beyond my degree. Even working there now, I don't actually know any of the campus traditions. When I was growing up though, I always thought I would somehow find myself back at LSU. Interestingly enough, it was the community found at LSU that I wanted to be a part of; after growing up tailgating at Tiger Stadium, I wanted to continue the traditions with my own friends and family. The campus culture is something that still gets me excited, even if I'm taking classes from five hours away.

References

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