

In Between There and Then, and Here and Now

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I had a lot of trouble getting started on this reflection. I had expected to be writing from the perspective of a new professional, incorporating all that I'd learned from the Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration (HESA) program at the University of Vermont (UVM) into my work with students. Since I am still in the process of job searching, however, I have to write from a different perspective. Fortunately, the theme for the moral conversation section of this year's journal, "There and Then, Here and Now: Reflection and Meaning Making in Student Affairs," inspired me to share what I have learned about personal meaning making.

There and Then

The "There" was Santa Barbara, CA. The "Then" was 2005. Before coming to HESA, I was in a comfortable place in my life. I was working as a college counselor for an educational consultant. I helped high school juniors and seniors navigate the college application process. I helped students develop their college choices, complete their applications, and edit their personal statements and resumes. I loved working with students! It was different and far more rewarding than my previous job of working with computers. I was well-paid and there was even discussion about me taking an even larger role, as the owner moved closer to retirement.

I lived in an affordable, nice three bedroom house with two roommates who were also longtime friends. We shared interests and hobbies and had a well-established network of friends who we saw on a regular basis. I had lived in Santa Barbara for some time at that point, and even knew enough about the town to consider myself a local in some respects. All in all, life was good. But there was something missing, and it was a personal friend and HESA alum who thought the HESA program might be what I was looking for.

Dave Laxamana earned his Associate of Arts in Psychology from San Diego Mesa College and his Bachelor of Arts in History from the University of California San Diego. In 2008, he graduated from the University of Vermont with a Master of Education in Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration (HESA). He served as one of the Content Editors for the 29th Edition of The Vermont Connection. Dave is currently job searching in Southern California.

Here and Now

The “Here” is my parents’ house in my hometown of San Diego, CA. The “Now” is 2009. I graduated this past May and drove back across the country to Southern California with my partner (also HESA ’08). I expected to find a student affairs position somewhere in the area. Before my search began in earnest, however, I suffered the worst attack of gout I had ever experienced. Without going into exhaustive detail, gout is an extremely painful, inflammatory form of arthritis that affects the joints, most commonly the big toe. I was essentially immobile, unable to move my foot for almost two months. Of course this would happen after my student health insurance expired.

I share this personal health issue because it was the most significant event of my post-HESA experience. It was an unexpected barrier to the career I had hoped to start shortly after graduation. The ailment drove home the concept of being “temporarily able-bodied” in a scary way. It not only caused me to reassess my immediate plans, but also compelled me to make meaning of this difficult circumstance. Before moving back to the West Coast, I knew that my job search would be difficult for a few reasons. Searching in a very specific region limited my choices. The economy was not only bad nationwide, but especially in California. The colleges and universities were particularly hard hit financially. I was also searching with my partner, which increased the complexity of the search. We had to consider the timing of our applications, as well as locations, and we had to discuss how we would handle the possibility of competing for the same position. This unforeseen health issue delayed my search considerably and made an already difficult process that much harder.

With forced bed-rest came lots of time to just think. I was forced to ask myself questions larger than the scope of a job search. I became preoccupied with my vulnerabilities. I examined my various responses to my predicament: fear, uncertainty, frustration, impatience, and depression. After focusing on the negatives that I characterized as ranging from natural response to self-indulgent exaggeration, I was able to rediscover my confidence in my abilities. Through honest self-assessment I reinforced my commitment to my chosen career path, despite obstacles expected or unexpected. How did I make meaning of this specific period of transition? I imagined a friend or student in my position asking me about this situation, if the roles were reversed. I thought about what I would say, and then I said it to myself. Where did I really learn to do this in a meaningful way? HESA.

Reflection and Meaning Making

So what happened between “There and Then” and “Here and Now,” between the past and the present? I basically went from a financially stable, socially enjoy-

able, and independent place in my life to being unemployed and living at home. What happened in between was HESA. And those 2 years were essential for my growth as a person and as a student affairs practitioner. Not only did I leave UVM with my Master's degree and new friends and colleagues, but also a wonderful partner.

When I think of meaning making I think of Robert J. Nash's class Philosophy of Education: The Search for Meaning. This class made me focus intentionally on the topic of meaning making. Reading Christopher Phillips' *Socrates Café: A Fresh Taste of Philosophy* (2004) and Julian Baggini's *What's It All About?: Philosophy & the Meaning of Life* (2001) provided me numerous questions on which to reflect. Reflecting on these questions and applying them to my life and my experiences helped me find a way to actively make meaning of my experiences. One writing assignment in particular, writing a personal letter to someone about my search for meaning, was a way for me to articulate the meaning I had been able to make of my HESA experience. I found that one way I made meaning of my HESA experience was to become involved, even over-involved. It was a sharp contrast from my undergraduate experience, which was characterized by a lack of participation.

A high level of involvement, and borderline over-involvement, seems to be characteristic of our field. It felt as though everyone around me was involved, or over-involved, in various committees, commissions, organizations, and programs. Often I was told, "Take care of yourself." In turn I would share this same phrase with classmates, advisees, and students. It was easy to say, but hard to do. I found myself being stretched to the limit by accepting these responsibilities, which fed my own internal interests and passions. These were things I wanted to do. One practicum supervisor once told me, "Be careful. Just because it doesn't feel like work, doesn't mean you're not doing work." I took on many things I wanted to do, and also many things I felt I had to do. Whether real or imagined, I thought there were external expectations. At times I felt almost obligated to say yes. Don't get me wrong, though. While balance may have been difficult for me to achieve, I am both proud of the work I did and grateful for the many opportunities I was given. I found meaning and connection in that invaluable, experiential learning.

For some students, HESA became easier with each passing semester. For me it became more difficult. I struggled with various aspects of the program the entire time I was there. I questioned whether I belonged and whether or not I should stay. Each semester got progressively harder, but I had to acknowledge that much of that was my own doing. While I felt that I said no a lot, I think I said yes even more often. My mindset was that I came to this program to participate, be involved, and make a difference. How do you decide what to do and who to help when there are so many individuals, groups, and causes that need and want

your help? And how do you balance your own well-being with helping others? These are the questions with which I struggled. Ironically, though, while these commitments were stressful to me, they were also deeply meaningful. My previous comfortable life had a lack of meaning and participation. I was happy and productive, but not fulfilled. My participation and involvement gave me meaning by establishing a connection to the community and creating a sense of belonging.

There and Then, Here and Now

In keeping with the “There and Then” aspect of the theme, I went back to the beginning of my graduate school career. I re-read the personal statement I wrote when I applied to HESA. I wanted to “challenge myself and my beliefs” and “leave my comfort zone.” I think I certainly accomplished that. Nothing exemplifies this more for me than my introduction to, and passion for, social justice issues. In the “Here and Now” I find hope in the election of the country’s first African American president. My enthusiasm is tempered, however, by the passage of the same-sex marriage ban in California. There is still a long road ahead, and the first steps are dialogue and understanding. HESA has taught me how to have difficult conversations about issues of social justice, not only with students, but with friends and family. I have learned about privilege, and I try to recognize and acknowledge my privileged identities and work for an equitable world. This particular change in my belief system and outlook is especially meaningful to me, and just one of the ways that HESA was life-changing for me. I was worried that this reflection might be a debacle, too personal, and maybe not universalizable enough. But personal is what characterized my HESA experience. Making my HESA experience personal was yet another way in which I made meaning during graduate school. Meaning making for me is personal.

What drew me to the HESA program? The people. What kept me in the program? The people. What do I miss most about HESA and UVM? The people. Although my narrative has been about my individual journey, meaning making was not an isolated process for me. Intentional personal relationship-building with classmates, colleagues, mentors, and students provided a support network that helped me survive and thrive. Learning and growing with a cohort gave my life meaning, and now those people are my friends and family. From student development theories to social justice activism, my two years in HESA were challenging, educational, and meaningful. I am honored to be a part of *The Vermont Connection*. It is not simply a journal, but a living, growing community. HESA Love!

References

- Baggini, J. (2004). *What's it all about?: Philosophy & the meaning of life*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Phillips, C. (2001). *Socrates café: A fresh taste of philosophy*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.