Finding Myself (Outside of) College:

Navigating a Journey Between College and Passion

Atira S. Meyer

Nebraska Wesleyan University

Finding Myself (Outside of) College:
Navigating a Journey Between College and Passion

It was the week before College Orientation, and as a recent high school graduate, I was eager for the upcoming adventure. While reviewing a list of organizations at Nebraska Wesleyan, I was both excited and overwhelmed by all the things I could be involved in… *Student Newspaper. Theatre productions. Yoga club. Forensics club (!?)* There were so many possibilities.

I sat across from my mom at the kitchen island and starred the things that piqued my interest in the brochure. You see, I was ready for that cinematic experience of "finding myself" in college, and since I had no idea what I wanted to do or where I wanted to end up in life, I figured the first step was to get involved with *everything*. It was the perfect plan.

Finding your passion in college isn't just some plotline in the movies. While statistics show that college students aren't always successful in finding their passion (Perez, 2017), the advice from professionals is clear: students should not only be encouraged to find their passion, or "find themselves," in college—they should be provided the resources to do so. According to Alaina Love (2008), college students are expected to "define" the rest of their lives after just four or five years in an undergraduate program. Love explained that, "coming to understand yourself and what [you are] passionate about, is the most important discovery you can make as student" (2008).

Others agree, including Jeffrey Selingo (2016) in an article for Harvard Business Review. He explained that while students and their parents put tremendous effort into the college search, "the series of decisions that start the moment they secure their spot—from choosing a major…to finding internships—increasingly plays a much larger role in life after graduation than where [they go] to college" (Selingo, 2016). According to Selingo, when students do not dedicate the

needed time and energy to developing their passion, they are not likely to have a clear or straightforward career path awaiting them post-graduation. As a result, he explained, many students drift aimlessly through at least the next decade of their lives (Selingo, 2016). Clearly, discovering a passion in college is important in the ever-changing and challenging job market (Love, 2008).

At the time I was preparing to start college, I didn't know what I would learn about myself, but I was prepared to do anything to figure it out. As I finished examining the student organization list, I excitedly marked down the date of the involvement fair in my planner, not knowing that one day, I would do the same for each involvement fair—not for the opportunities to get involved, but as a reminder to pass through campus at the right time to score some freebies for my lunch.

It's not that the studies were wrong about the college experience. I really did find my passions while I was in college—except it didn't happen while I was *at* college, and that's a surprisingly large difference.

Over the last four years, my college education and my passion-based career path have both progressed, separately, but parallel to one another. Despite all odds, nearly everything I've done at Wesleyan and all the work I've done to follow my passion have remained entirely separate.

Discovery

Although I didn't realize it at the time, my passion (and eventual career path) was brewing early on—before college, and before I knew what it was.

First Experiences

It started with "adventuring." That's what my new best friend and I liked to call our nature walks in early high school. We somehow stumbled into a friendship coming out of middle

school after not really knowing each other during the previous three years. Nessa and I were both a little weird, socially awkward, and didn't have true "friend groups" of our own. By chance, I had kept her phone number after saving it during a school trip in eighth grade—in case of emergency—and texted her that summer when my family had extra tickets to a baseball game. I had no real friends of my own at the time, and my younger brother's friends had to cancel, so I went out on a limb and sent the (admittedly terrifying) message asking her if she wanted to go. She said yes, and thus began the last eight years of this crazy, one-of-a-kind friendship.

It was on these nature walks on the outskirts of town where I discovered my love for capturing moments. I had been through some negative childhood years with my parents' divorce, then a falling-out with my father and his side of the family, and never really finding true friends that stuck around, so this sudden connection with Nessa made me sentimental and nostalgic—I was drawn to the idea of making memories last. Luckily for me, she had recently discovered her own self-confidence, and she *loved* having her picture taken. It was the perfect match.

We were both proud new owners of iPhone 4's, and you could take *so* many pictures on those things. The photos were *such* high quality! We were enamored with what the new technology gave us. Having never touched more than my mom's old point-and-shoot camera, the power I held in my hands with that iPhone made me feel like a real artist. Or something else entirely—a storyteller. To this day, I can't bring myself to say I like creating things for the sake of making art. For me, it's still about capturing a moment, showing people's personalities through a photo or video, or showcasing some detail of life. Before long, I found myself asking to take photos of Nessa just as often as she asked to have a photo taken of herself, and thus began my early connection to photography.

Growth

Discovering my passion only grew from there. After three years of being a "photographer" of my friends using my trusty iPhone, I met Josh. Compared to me, with my iPhone and cheesy VSCOcam filters, Josh was a *real* photographer. He wasn't, actually. But he had a real DSLR camera and he knew how to use it. I was in awe of his skills—not just in photography, which we look back on now with a laugh, but in everything from building computers to building furniture. He was raised to be a true Jack-of-All-Trades by his supportive family who encouraged him to learn about whatever he was interested in. I was immediately impressed by his somewhat amateur skills in various areas, especially photography. Nessa and I were quick to ask if he could take photos for us.

He did, one snowy morning in December of 2013. We trekked in the snow behind his house and posed in front of his neighbor's pine trees in our thrift store sweaters, throwing poorly-molded snowballs at each other for the camera. A few months later, the day after taking him to my Junior prom, Josh and I made it official. Over that summer and fall, as his new girlfriend and a senior in high school, I became his subject as he practiced his photography skills. Josh took my senior photos (multiple times) and as he became more familiar with portrait photography, so did I. He would bring along his old camera from when he was a kid and give me lessons on shutter speed and ISO, and when we would get back home with the photos, he'd let me sit with him at his desk and backseat-edit. I didn't know it at the time, but that experience of looking over Josh's shoulder and collaborating over a project—although it was not always completely civil—would reflect what a lot of our work would look like as time went on.

By the fall of my first year in college, we had actualized Josh's photography business—aptly named "JCB Photography" after his and his dad's initials—and had taken a few friends'

senior portraits. Nessa was often our go-to subject when we wanted to test new gear, new locations, or new ideas. In November of 2015, the three of us went out on a pleasant morning to a leaf-covered trail and took some photos. At this point in our experience with photoshoots, I was primarily Josh's assistant and would hold a reflector or diffuser as needed, as I didn't have a camera of my own yet. But this time, he didn't really need my assistance. Unsure of what to do with myself other than watch, I had a sudden moment of creative inspiration—I pulled out my phone and started taking videos of the photoshoot as it happened in front of me.

Immediately following the photoshoot, I searched for a free app for my phone that could cut and splice clips together with music and landed on Adobe Premiere Clip. I had the perfect song picked out—*Into the Wild* by LP—and I haphazardly arranged clip after clip of Nessa tossing leaves into the air to the beat of the song. The finished product was rough, but I was proud of the result and cherished it as my first video creation. From this moment on, my passion for creating videos began to grow.

Development

Not long after discovering my interest in video content, the opportunities to exercise and improve those skills opened up all around me. Through Josh's photography business, I was able to continuously improve my photo and video-making skills on each photoshoot. Our connections, including references gained through photography work, allowed us more and more access to jobs. Starting with senior portraits and family photos, things quickly progressed and soon came website design projects, small-scale marketing jobs, then video projects for educational institutes, nonprofits, and bigger companies. Our freelance work connections spawned into connections with a few local businesses, and together we began working for Mid-

America Video and V2 Content—two family-run video production businesses in the Lincoln area.

Self-Taught Skills

While I felt a little lost chasing after this new passion with no formal training, I doubled-down on the work to cultivate my skills. With Josh's help, I eased my way into the technologies to get the hang of working with what "the professionals" use. Josh shared his Adobe Creative Suite license with me and loaded all the programs on my laptop, and slowly, I began teaching myself the ins and outs of design software, photo editing, video, and animation. He knew the basics and walked me through some initial lessons—*here's how you set up your Lightroom catalogue, here are the tools I'm familiar with in Photoshop, here's how you set up a project in After Effects*—but from there, we were in unfamiliar waters. Google was our best friend during the learning period, because the formal Adobe Suite textbooks are very expensive, and luckily, it didn't take long before we both became proficient in working with the tools.

At the same time I was teaching myself the Adobe Creative Suite, I began checking cameras out for a week at a time from Wesleyan's library. With temporary possession of a camera, I could take photos of my own on the weekends and continue practicing my skills beyond what I learned from assisting and watching. Eventually, I obtained a hand-me-down camera from my Aunt and Uncle and was able to practice with my new gear whenever I needed. Learning the basics from Josh in the past had been helpful, but working hands-on with my own camera helped improve my level of competency. Before long, I was more confident working with both the creative software and handling the physical camera gear, and I was able to keep up with Josh on photo and video shoots. Suddenly, I was completely competent and proficient in a handful of entirely self-taught skills—skills I wasn't learning in my classes at college.

According to Carlin Flora (2016), there is a dichotomy between the growing value of self-taught knowledge or skills and the perception of self-teaching (or autodidacticism) in the professional world. Of course, there is no such thing as pure, 100% autodidacticism, since even self-learners rely on the help and guidance of other people, whether that comes from conversation, books, videos, or any of the multitudes of resources now available online (Flora, 2016). Still, the value of self-taught skills is ever-increasing as it is one gateway for people to reach new opportunities in their lives, careers, and educations. Simply having purpose behind a learning goal can propel a person to obtain resources and persevere through the self-learning process on any given topic or skillset. However, Flora posed one question that many career-focused autodidacts still face: "Without the 'branding' of a school, how can they demonstrate their skills?"

Portfolio-Building Work

Although Flora suggested that the fear of informality should not discourage those who are eager to learn, I still worried that my self-taught skills would not hold up against peers (or competitors) who developed their skills through a more formal education. Because of this fear, I doubled-down on the personal work and took any opportunity that came early on as a vital project to build my portfolio. On a whim, I reconnected with my dad and his side of the family and began designing apparel and advertising for his wife's yoga studio. Despite the disparities between us still being entirely unresolved, I pursued the connection anyway, eventually branching out into photo and video content for her business and even personal needs.

Aside from family members, I also engaged in quite a bit of other unpaid work for the sake of building my portfolio. Photos for friends, video content for an up-and-coming local magazine, even album artwork design for someone's Soundcloud made it onto my to-do list as I

strived to compile a wholistic representation of my skills for future employers. I would later sit through a lecture in an adjunct-taught internship course that cursed the idea of doing free work "for exposure." While the local business owner and designer giving the lecture was right, exposure *doesn't* pay the bills, I held onto the idea that it *was* still valuable. Although it led me to become overworked very early on, and perhaps a little taken-advantage-of, the work still allowed me to use, improve, and showcase my self-taught skills in a way I wasn't able to do in my education.

The work, paid or unpaid, was valuable because I was in a place where I needed to prove myself before I could move forward—a company wasn't going to hire me for graphic design or video production as a Communication Studies major *unless* I could prove my worth in both. It sounds harsh and a bit stressful, which it was, but it proved to be true. Although I didn't feel successful whenever I was passed over for the early internships I applied for, the real-world experiences were undeniably valuable.

This outlook was confirmed in a recent interview with Adam Lisagor (2018), actor, producer, and founder of Sandwich Video Inc. in Los Angeles. Lisagor stumbled into the video-making business by accident after self-producing a product video for an app he launched with a friend. From there, it grew into a successful business and his videos for products and services like TrueCar, Square, Slack, and Starbucks have gained widespread recognition. He didn't start his career intending to run a production company one day—although he studied film in college, he took a job in visual effects post-graduation and the video company eventually came out of a passion project. It was his big ideas paired with his visual effects skills—gained from on-the-job experience—that led his app-launch video (but not the app itself) to become successful.

His advice was clear and simple: get out there and start doing it for real (Lisagor, 2018). Although it was specifically for me, the advice can stand for anyone. The "it" doesn't matter, in his mind—whatever it is you're passionate about, whatever you're trying to get better at, that's what you should be actively pursuing. The hands-on experience with a skill or a line of work is what he believes to be the most valuable thing for young people to obtain.

"That's the real education," He told me. "Seeing people who do what you want to be doing, [then] doing it for real, for a living."

I had already been doing this for years by the time he told me, but the advice still resonated. It was a confirmation that what I had been doing so far—no matter how stressful, how tiring, how hard it was sometimes—it was the right thing to do.

Balance

By the time I was a Sophomore in college, I had reached a total of three jobs that were occurring simultaneously with my 16-to-18-credit-hour schedules. Keeping up with a retail job in addition to the passion projects already began to feel difficult toward the end of the previous summer, so the addition of schoolwork made everything that much worse. I found myself frustrated at the idea that I needed to complete a specific number of service-learning hours for a class and stressed as I tried to determine where I could fit the hours into my schedule. I became annoyed at any assignment that required attendance at an event on campus, or any onsite involvement outside of the classroom. At that point, the excitement around being involved on campus that I had experienced so intensely prior to starting college had officially faded.

I struggled to even balance feeling proud of being busy—because I was *building a career*—and feeling ashamed that my perspective on involvement changed so drastically in just a few years. At a school like Wesleyan, not being involved is far from some kind of status symbol.

But with what I had been accomplishing on my own outside of college, it truly felt like being too busy for school activities should be treated more like the milestone that it was. Instead, I just found myself feeling strangely disconnected and somewhat judged by my non-working peers.

Still, every moment outside of school and work, (and, truthfully, many moments during school and work as well) were consumed by sorting through my mental list of tasks: managing, planning, keeping track. As my classmates would introduce themselves at the start of the semester with a cute detail like a favorite hobby or pastime, I would find myself only able to come up with, "I work 60 hours a week." That would inevitably cause people's spirits to fall; some people would apologize to me after I mentioned it. I wanted to scream out that no, that was a good thing! But I could tell that not many of my peers would understand that feeling.

Perhaps it was the stress, but I also felt very strongly that I no longer wanted to be in college. These feelings were likely related to the role-balance—and role conflict—I was experiencing between work and school (Lenaghan et. al., 2007). According to Lenaghan and Sengupta, "In order to meet the increasing tuition costs, many students have to be employed in a full-time or part-time job in order to meet the financial needs. This is further prompted by the fact that many parents can no longer support or bear the full financial costs of a college education" (2007). Students employed out of necessity, therefore, are more likely to experience depletion when balancing their roles as a student and as an employee. The findings in Lenaghan and Sengupta's study determined that when college students experienced role-overload (or strain), "the conflict they were likely to experience was work interfering with school which, in turn, increased negative effects and lowered a student's feelings of well-being" (2007). The study suggested that students find work to be both instrumental to achieving goals, but to also have emotional effects when striving for a college education.

I was experiencing this divide, and therefore, the conflict between these two areas of my life: working was instrumental to the passion I had recently developed and my financial needs, but it interfered with my dedication to getting an education. With that came another issue: after finding my passion, I learned very quickly that there was no program in place at Wesleyan that aligned with what I wanted to do, nor were there enough classes to build more than a minor around it. Even then, the custom study I was able to create had to be generalized to "Digital Art" as there were not enough resources to build anything specific to video. It became very clear that this may not have been the right path for me, but it felt like it was too late to switch schools because of scholarships I accepted—and scholarships that had to be turned down—in order to go to Wesleyan.

Value of Education

Choosing to continue—to forge my own path instead of quit or transfer—has unfortunately been more of an obligation rather than the holy grail of success that I once viewed it as. My mom attended college three times in her life—the first being Wesleyan, straight out of high school, then the University of Nebraska - Lincoln, which she left halfway through to get married, then, eventually, Southeast Community College where she got an Associate's Degree in a field that no longer proves relevant in her endless job searches. At nine years old, I watched her stay up late and get up early to do her homework around her busy, single-mom schedule balancing two kids and three jobs. Getting a degree for the first time at 37 years old, she made an effort to teach me the value of education. She ensured me that I'd end up like her—working menial jobs that she didn't love and struggling to stay ahead—if I didn't go to college.

My experience with an undereducated single parent was not unlike the experience of many other first-generation college students. As it turns out, students are considered first-

generation when their immediate parental figures have not completed at least a bachelor's degree (Olson, 2010). I wasn't close with my dad during any of my formative years, so the only influence for education was my mother who never achieved her bachelor's at any of the four-year institutions she previously attended. Confirmed by the messages I received growing up, a study by Silva and Snellman (2018) found that working class parents of first-generation college students will paint college education in a positive light and treat it as a form of salvation. The researchers found that working class parents shape the meanings of college simply by "encourage[ing] their children to do better than they did" and perceiving any college as upward mobility for their children (Silva et. al., 2018). Olson's phenomenological study of a group of working class first-generation students also found that the men and women went to college because "they had been told, had observed, or had assumed that it was the most direct path to success—defined most often in terms of fulfilling employment and financial freedom" (2010).

So, the *how* part of my life plan was always easy for me, even if I didn't know *what* I wanted to do. I achieved high-A's all through school and graduated with a 4.2 weighted GPA, all because I knew I had to get into college, and I had to get as many scholarships as I could in order to get there. It was always clear to me that people like my mom, with low-level degrees attained later in life, didn't get good jobs.

Additionally, the narrative of college as salvation also comes with an aspect of practicality. Olson found that, in general, first-generation students "work more hours each week, take fewer credits, volunteer less, … and are more likely to live in off-campus housing than non-[first-generation] peers" (2010). Therefore, first-generation students are far less likely to be involved in the experiences that are believed to promote college student success. Not only do working class, first-generation students work more during college and remain less involved on

campus, they are also more likely to attend college in search of a "practical" degree with tangible or recognizable markers of success (Olson, 2010). For me, this meant that I approached college with the perception that there was *no way* I could go to college and get something "useless" like an art degree. In Olson's research, this perspective was described as the "classic horror stories [of] working culture—earning a four-year degree and then working at McDonald's" (2010).

Yet there I was, a sophomore in college, already experiencing the kind of financial and career-related success I never saw at home—and I was reaching these goals in an art-based field. I made so many connections and got involved with many companies who hired me for my experience—not dependent on the status of my education or my degree. I was becoming successful because of my own skills and my own hard work, not because of a college degree, and that was unexpected to say the least. I always believed the only way I was going to get myself ahead of the poverty I grew up in was to go to college, get a degree, and *then* work hard. Still, I found myself following through with college for the remaining two years, despite the contradictory discoveries I made while developing my passion. It was, truthfully, all I knew how to do; it had always been a vital step in my life plan.

Doubt

Despite experiencing success in building my career outside of college, I still had doubts. As clear as it was that I had been working hard for the achievements I was earning, I was still plagued by the feeling that I still wasn't doing things "right," that I wasn't good enough, and that I was cheating my way to success. While I felt alone in these feelings, they are actually very common in young women who attain academic and career-related success (Parkman, 2016). As I moved away from a low-level retail job paired with my artistic side jobs, I began pursuing jobs that required a portfolio of my work. That's when the doubts began to feel like reality.

Imposter Syndrome

What I was experiencing is called Imposter Syndrome (or the Imposter Phenomenon). Introduced in 1978 by Clance and Imes, the Imposter Syndrome is a phenomenon where select high-achieving individuals, usually women, will believe their success is a fraud, "despite outstanding academic and professional accomplishments," and believe they have simply fooled anyone who believes in their success. According to Sherman (2013), "people with imposter syndrome feel a level of self-doubt that can lead to overwork and a fear of failure." Further research on this phenomenon has found that it is often paired with anxiety disorders and depression, and women with the syndrome are prone to working longer, working harder, and seeking perfection (Parkman, 2016).

Clance and Imes suggest that the Imposter Syndrome is likely to develop in individuals whose intelligence and accomplishments were emphasized at a young age within the family (1978). They explained the following example:

> The family conveys to the girl that she is superior in every way—intellect, personality, appearance, and talents. There is nothing that she cannot do if she wants to, and she can do it with ease. She is told numerous examples of how she demonstrated her precocity as an infant and toddler, such as learning to talk and read very early. (Clance et. al., 1978)

A person is led to believe that they are, in some sense, perfect. When feelings of perfection are challenged later in life, it is easier to spiral into the negative feelings associated with the syndrome.

I was always the smart older sister. My brother struggled as he entered school age, but I was constantly reminded how I mastered my numbers and letters very early. I

learned to read soon after, and even taught myself how to count by 2's and 5's simply by recognizing the patterns on some of my toys. I had surpassed the level of learning that would be taught in pre-school, so I skipped ahead to kindergarten. I always achieved good grades with ease and was always told of my impressive skills in anything I tried to do. So, it is no surprise that I would be prone to this Imposter Phenomenon later in life.

My favorite communication theory to use to examine society was Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) presented by W. Barnett Pearce. CMM explains how we co-construct our realities through communication, arguing that "identities, episodes, relationships, and cultures are being constructed by the patterns of communication" and that communication is an act of doing something, "thus making the events and objects in our social world" (Griffin, 2018). However, my understanding of this theory also began to subconsciously confirm the negative thoughts of Imposter Syndrome. Knowing that constructing reality was the product of stories being told, I believed that I was simply convincing others of my fraudulent success through the stories told in my communication.

Another aspect affecting my perception of achievement was attribution. When I felt confident in myself and my abilities, I would be more likely to attribute my shortcomings to external factors and my successes to internal factors (i.e. I experienced failure due to circumstances, but success was the result of my own hard work). This is the standard example of self-perception bias in Heider's Attribution Theory (Griffin, 2018). However, I was starting to perceive that everything was exactly the opposite: while everyone else's success was due to their own hard work, clearly my own success was the result of lucky coincidence and favorable circumstances. I did not feel comfortable attributing my success to my hard work, but believed my failures were due to personal

shortcomings in skill and effort. According to Hall et. al. (2011), "research on attribution theory demonstrates that … following the occurrence of failure events, attributions to uncontrollable factors result in more demotivating emotions (e.g., apathy, shame) and poorer performance" (p. 320). Therefore, attributing success to uncontrollable factors was similarly demotivating, and caused me to believe I had not actually earned those successes.

Artistic Conflict

The intense self-doubt started internally, but it was unfortunately confirmed by a few negative experiences during my education. It began with a couple classes and a specific professor. Although Wesleyan plans to offer more digital-focused art courses, during my Junior year, all that was available to me to help build my minor were a set of two courses called Digital Media I and II. These courses sounded exciting to me—the first was focused on design software like Photoshop and Illustrator, as well as web design and coding, and the second course developed skills in video and animation. They were taught by the photography professor. She seemed like an intriguing woman—I was interested in getting to know her better and, hopefully, learning new skills from her. Although I was already proficient in photoshop and illustrator, I still expected to gain plenty of new knowledge from her digital media courses.

Unfortunately, that's not quite how the experience went. At the time I was taking the first Digital Media course, I had just started my new job as a Graphic Design Intern at a local cybersecurity company, where I was also helping produce, design, and publish video marketing content. I was working about 20 hours per week at that job, and although my schedule was busy and my plate was more than full, I was excited to spend my Monday and Wednesday afternoons in the computer lab working on art and learning web design. Introducing myself, I excitedly

shared my career progress and interests outside of Wesleyan with the class, including the professor—and she seemed to have a negative reaction to that from the very beginning. I never felt the support or advice I had eagerly wished for. Instead, she seemed judgmental and highly critical of my passion and my skills.

Rather than being supported by a professional artist and provided resources, advice, or guidance, I immediately felt isolated and unworthy. The professor would criticize my professional/commercial goals and praise the fine arts as the "right" way to approach creating. She disregarded my experience with the media because I had never taken *her* photography class. Still, I brushed off the negativity and assumed she just had an incompatible personality. She regarded herself very highly and boasted of experience in everything from directing music videos to designing and coding websites, so I was eager to learn from her.

Unfortunately, "learning" coding from her class was simply going to Code Academy videos and StackExchange links online and being instructed to learn from others on our own time. I picked up the skills fairly quickly from the YouTube videos and a few guided exercises I found, and soon I was the go-to resource for others in the class. By the end of the semester, I had multiple classmates tell me that they wrote on their course evaluation, "I would have never made it through this class if it weren't for Atira," because the professor taught so poorly.

While it broke my heart, I moved on to the Digital Media II course the next semester anyway, hoping for a better experience in the class that aligned with my passion: video and animation. The experience was not an improvement—in fact, things got worse. Every step of the way, the professor brought me down and took away any bit of confidence I had built up. She criticized my camera, she criticized my past experience, and she did so while using her own work as the standards. I grew increasingly confused throughout the semester as I would try to go

above and beyond on assignments to prove I could do it, and she would treat my passion as if it was ill-directed. I had no intention of pursuing fine art as my career, so I was a bit uninterested as she would show slideshows of her own performance art videos—digging holes and sticking her head in the ground and whatever else performance artists do—but I still longed for support and guidance from an art professor like her. Instead, I was getting condescending comments and negativity. I began to feel frustrated over my video creations, crying at the slightest inconvenience because I was reaching my wit's end.

Finally, we reached the big, end-of-the-semester project: the Avant Garde video. I was so excited to give this project "my all" and I had already developed a unique video idea that would look at the concepts of aging, beauty standards, and women's youth, inspired by a song I hoped to incorporate into the video. The professor informed me that she wasn't interested in a video with a storyline—my idea "wasn't weird enough to be considered true Avant Garde." That was some of the strangest feedback I had received on a project proposal before, but I reluctantly scrapped my fully-developed video plan in the interest of not failing the class.

In time, I came up with something weirder—something with no storyline. I had whimsical, sheer fabric flowing in the wind, ghostlike figures dancing across the frame, sunsets, horizons, water rippling, and more. I proudly presented my strange creation to the class and received hearty applause.

"That looked… professional," The professor remarked.

But it was criticism, not a compliment. My final grade on the assignment was a low B, the reason being that it looked like "a professional music video." While "music video" may not have been the goal, using my resources to create the most professional and high-quality art that I could was definitely what I was going for. I thought that I would be encouraged and supported in

challenging myself to create the best work that I could. Instead, I found myself breaking down over the disappointment and frustration.

Creating things in those classes was often the result of anger, frustration, and the negative feelings constantly telling me to give it all up. I had to remind myself every day why video was my passion and force myself to work through the pain. The courses I took with that professor not only broke me down, but also made me constantly doubt myself and my abilities as an artist. She nearly caused me to lose my passion for the work I was once so interested in. But I came out on the other side—with a bit of a broken spirit, but still stronger. When I learned she was being terminated, and that other students were having similar experiences, I started to move away from the doubt and became more sure of myself and my art once again.

Work-related Stress

My confidence in my abilities did not falter again until about a year later, during my final semester of college, when a sudden change at my full-time job made me question the value of my skills and hard work. The cybersecurity company where I started as a graphic design intern had grown to be my newest holy grail of success and career-related promise. I was given a significant raise after my first year and confirmed a true, full-time status post-graduation. My new job title, Content Marketing Specialist, encompassed the broad range of work I was doing for the company, from design, to content writing, to video production.

Despite the fact that I had been heavily involved with content creation and video production since starting with the company in 2017, the two other marketing employees met and decided to develop a job opening for a new video specialist. I was hurt and confused, initially. Thanks to my newly-discovered confidence in my own work, this news felt as if the role was

being hired out from under me—especially since I had been working so hard to create videos for the last year and a half.

Not that my self-confidence was wrong or misguided, but it was making me a little cocky. The truth was, I wasn't being passed over—I just had to apply for the job like everyone else. And because there was a video professional out there with more years of experience, I didn't get the job like I hoped. It admittedly felt strange to not "get" a job I was already doing—and at the company I was already doing it for—but I had to move past the feelings of failure and rejection to see that there was a lesson to be learned.

The stress I experienced during this shift at my soon-to-be full-time workplace was a valuable reminder. First, that working hard for something does not guarantee success. And second, that my first office job was *not* my end goal.

The experience opened my eyes about the way in which I had been perceiving my promised future at the job. While there was still a position waiting for me, despite not being picked for the video-specific role, I realized that fighting for a valued place at an organization that wasn't really going anywhere should not have been the prize or goal I was regarding it as. Despite the security I felt in the promised stability, it was time to get back to my portfolio and prepare it for the next step in my journey.

Success

My personal ideas of success were a constant source of motivation throughout my entire college experience, as well as my efforts to pursue my passion. Despite the doubts and the obstacles, I am very lucky to have worked hard and achieved a level of "success" that once seemed very far away.

Stability

I grew up in a family that was always just below poverty level. (Of course, I recognize that "just below" is far more privileged than many people who experience long-term unemployment, homelessness, and other extreme poverty situations. Still, I have chosen to use my experience as a reason to strive and work for better.) While there were periods where we were on the EBT program, or "food stamps," the cost of making enough money to afford monthly expenses usually meant that my single mother's income fell just above the cutoff for federal assistance. She had to work hard for the things we needed, let alone the things we wanted. When my brother and I wanted something that wasn't vital, she made sure we understood what it took to get those things.

I made a friend in early high school who came from an upper middle-class family with a large house outside of town. Although she came from a family of first-generation immigrants, she was lucky to experience luxuries in life without realizing the hardships others face to get there. She had no way of empathizing with my perspective. She discovered my "Emergency $20" in my bedroom one day and snatched it.

"See! You have some money! So you can…" She said, presumably finishing that sentence with whatever outing or purchase we had been arguing over. Something I probably told her I couldn't do because I couldn't afford to.

"No, that's my Emergency Twenty." I told her matter-of-factly.

She didn't understand.

"I keep that in the drawer in case my mom ever runs out of money… that way, I can help. Then we can still get groceries or something." I explained.

She laughed right in my face.

"Twenty dollars is not enough to buy groceries."

I looked away dejectedly, tears in my eyes. I didn't really know that. At least, I hadn't taken the time to think about what I could do with only $20.

Thus began my fixation on saving money. Birthday money from distant relatives became my new source for growing my "emergency" funds drawer, soon replacing the $20 bill with 50's and hundreds, before eventually depositing hundreds of dollars into my first savings account. I even made the conscious choice to continue living at home—in a somewhat stressful environment—until the end of my Junior year of college to bolster my savings before I was ready to move out and take on my own expenses.

Overall, having financial trouble and being "in need" while growing up was a key factor in my motivation and life plans. I wanted to make sure I would never worry where my next meal would come from, never worry about my ability to pay bills, or whether or not I would have a place to live if hard times hit. So, to me, success is stability. And somehow, due to my own hard work and achievements, I've reached stability. In my future, I can see the promise of stability for years to come.

Happiness

There were milestones in my search for success and stability: college degree, job(s), savings, support system, staying ahead of debt, and, of course, making good choices. Even in the face of stress and feeling overwhelmed, those things kept me constantly motivated—and they still do. But as I've developed career-related skills on my own outside of my college education, I've found that success also looks a little like happiness, and I have found that I have that in certain areas of my work.

Growing up, I looked at success so objectively and defined it with strict, clear conditions based on my experience—and loving my work was never on the list. I never knew that it could be. Today, it's not only on the list, but it has been checked off by many of the projects I am involved in on a regular basis… and it is clear that I will continue to find it, as long as I continue to chase my passion.

Conclusion

Looking back over my journey of completing a college education and developing a career out of a passion, I see someone who has grown in ways I could have never imagined on that summer morning as I desperately searched for the one student organization that would be *"my thing."* How could I have known that I wouldn't find "my thing" in a club, a friend group, or even in the walls of the school I would soon be attending? It was a part of me, long before I knew it was there. The hard work—sweat and tears, as it's so often referred to—was a vital piece of my journey into adulthood and into finding myself. Although this journey looks nothing like I thought it would, and has taken me down a path I would have never considered before, it is clear that I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing. Even the hardest moments in this journey are a reminder that things are going incredibly well in a life I worked very hard for—I'm growing from where I started.

Resources

Clance, P.R. & Imes, S. (1978). The Imposter Phenomenon in High Achieving Women:

Dynamics and Therapeutic Intervention. *Psychotherapy Theory, Research and Practice,*

15(3). Retrieved from: https://www.womeninanesthesiology.org/wp-

content/uploads/2017/03/ip_high_achieving_women.pdf

Flora, C. (2016, July 5). Psychology Today. Retrieved from

https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/articles/201607/the-golden-age-teaching-yourself-

anything

Griffin, E. A. (2018). *A first look at communication theory*. Boston: McGraw-Hill Higher

Education.

Hall, N., Jackson Gradt, S., Goetz, T., & Musu-Gillette, L. (2011). Attributional Retraining, Self-

Esteem, and the Job Interview: Benefits and Risks for College Student Employment.

Journal of Experimental Education, 79(3), 318–339.

https://doi.org/10.1080/00220973.2010.503247

Lenaghan, J. A., & Sengupta, K. (2007). Role Conflict, Role Balance and Affect: A Model of

Well-being of the Working Student. Journal of Behavioral & Applied Management, 9(1),

88–109. Retrieved from

http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=28013499&login.asp

&site=ehost-live

Love, A. (2008). Got Purpose? Got Passion? Black Collegian, 39(1), 23–24. Retrieved from

http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=35347092&login.asp

&site=ehost-live

Lisagor, A. (2018) Personal communication, Email Interview.

Olson, J. S. (2010). "Chasing a passion": the early-career lived experience of first-generation

college graduates (Doctoral dissertation, Pennsylvania State University).

https://etda.libraries.psu.edu/files/final_submissions/3008

Parkman, A. (2016). The Imposter Phenomenon in Higher Education: Incidence and Impact.

Journal of Higher Education: Theory and Practice, 16(1), 51-60. Retrieved from

http://www.m.www.na-businesspress.com/JHETP/ParkmanA_Web16_1_.pdf

Perez, A. (2017, March 10) The Washington Post. Retrieved from

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2017/03/10/its-not-just-about-

jobs-colleges-must-help-students-find-their-

passions/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.2a4f620e51e3

Selingo, J. (2016, May 31). Harvard Business Review. Retrieved from

https://hbr.org/2016/05/two-thirds-of-college-grads-struggle-to-launch-their-careers

Silva, J. M. & Snellman, K. (2018). Salvation or Safety Net? Meanings of "College" among

Working- and Middle-Class Young Adults in Narratives of the Future. Social Forces

97(2), 559-582. Oxford University Press. Retrieved April 9, 2019, from Project MUSE

database. http://muse.jhu.edu.thor.nebrwesleyan.edu/article/715403

Sherman, R. O. (2013) Imposter Syndrome: When you feel like you're faking it. *American Nurse

Today,* 8(5), 57-58. Retrieved from

https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Rose_Sherman/publication/256475007_Sherman_R

O_2013_Imposter_Syndrome_American_Nurse_Today_85_57-

58/links/0c960522f53cd9647f000000.pdf