

Ashley De Medio-Meroth: Moving for the Right Opportunity Facilitator's Guide¹

Discussion

The case, *Ashley De Medio-Morath: Moving for the Right Opportunity*, helps students understand the need to be flexible and stay open to opportunities in their pursuit of an advanced degree and a stable career. Ashley changed her mind about studying biology and moved on to English literature, a decision that led to her changing schools as well. She took on a challenging work and academic schedule, but was also willing to adapt to more reasonable hours when she was convinced of the importance of achieving good grades. The case begins when Ashley is in the middle of another potential transition, making a decision about where she should attend graduate school. Considering various options is something everyone has to do throughout their life, and learning to think strategically and systematically about the choices in front of us is a skill worth practicing.

Many students who are considering graduate school get fixated on a certain graduate school or program. This can be a result of wanting to stay in a certain area because of family issues or networks of friends. Or it can be due to a student's fascination with a certain program or professor, or even with a particular career path. However, there is very little certainty in regards to graduate admissions. Unlike the undergraduate process, which is usually accomplished in a centralized manner, graduate students are chosen within the department by the faculty who will be mentoring the students and there are many constraints and factors that go into creating a graduate school cohort. It is certainly possible for a student to get into their number one choice school, but staying open to options can allow students to consider better funding packages as well as growth opportunities. Students should also be open to considering different career paths once they receive their degree.

¹ This facilitator's guide accompanies the case of the same title and is to be used for class instruction and discussion. It was prepared by Sylvia Sensiper, PhD, Director of the Guardian Professions Program, Office of Graduate Studies, UC Davis. The following have provided funding for the GPP: The Stuart Foundation, the May and Stanley Smith Charitable Trust, The California Wellness Foundation and the University of California Office of the President.

Abstract

Ashley De Medio-Meroth achieved excellent high school grades but didn't have much guidance in regards to her college applications. Enrolling at Cal State LA with biology as her major, she soon found herself questioning this decision. Moving back to her hometown of Hemet to continue her studies at Mt. Jacinto Community College, she switched to English literature and found herself enjoying classes much more. When she transferred to UC Riverside as an English major, she also took on a minor in education. A hard worker, Ashley had pursued a challenging job and school schedule, working a night shift to make sure she could support herself. At UCR, this work life balance improved when the GSP administrators suggested she take a job with more regular hours. Towards the end of her undergraduate studies, Ashley decided to pursue a teaching credential at UCR until she learned about a program at the UC Davis School of Education that provided funding for former foster youth. The tuition assistance was a great benefit and the program also used a hands-on training method that Ashley valued. Student teaching began right away and she would get into a classroom in the spring to work on her teaching skills. Should she make a trip north to find out more about the program?

Pedagogy

The trajectory of Ashley's undergraduate education and her attendance at three different universities is not uncommon, particularly among students who haven't received much feedback during their high school years. Often students with a background in foster care or students who are first in their family to attend college are not aware of different educational opportunities, nor have they had much substantive feedback about their strengths and talents. The high cost of education puts an enormous amount of pressure on students to decide early on about a career path and the idea of using the undergraduate years as a time to explore various disciplines and careers is no longer advised. Still, students should be encouraged to explore options through other activities. Participating in summer pipeline programs, working in internships, and conducting informational interviews can help students see career and graduate school options they may not realize simply by taking undergraduate classes. Adding majors or certificate programs and talking to graduate students and professors can provide students with ideas about activities they like that could become careers.

This case can be used to raise the issue of deciding on a major and/or a career. It can also be used to help remind students that grades are 'investments.' Many students need to work to pay their bills but they also need to be aware of the importance of good grades, particularly if they are interested in pursuing an advanced degree. Taking on a lot of debt as an undergraduate isn't a good idea but students need to find a balance. A good GPA makes it easier to gain acceptance to graduate school and ultimately to get a job that can result in a higher salary. Taking on some debt as an undergraduate is reasonable if it helps a student maintain a higher GPA.

Teaching points:

1. Changing majors with a career option in mind
2. Creating a balanced schedule that promotes good grades
3. Attending information sessions
4. Staying sensitive to the needs of family and partners

- 1. Changing majors with a career option in mind:** Like many students, Ashley started with a career goal in mind and then worked backwards to find out what classes were required. But this did not seem to give her the inspiration she needed to continue moving forward with her education. Instead, when she followed her passionate interest in reading and English literature, she arrived at a career path that seemed more fitting and comfortable. It is very common for students to change their major 2 to 3 times or even more during their undergraduate years. Most advisors, administrators and faculty that work with students understand this but it can be disconcerting to the students themselves. Many students are unrealistic about their motivations and goals or uninformed about careers and professions and how they develop. It is useful to employ multiple methods to help them understand the day-to-day activity involved in any particular job. Ashley talked to both her professors and the teachers she met when observing in classrooms and really tried to assess whether teaching high school was a job she would want to do. Students should also be reminded that finding out what they *don't* like is almost as useful as discovering what they *do* like.
- 2. Creating a balanced schedule that promotes good grades:** Ashley worked a night shift for a variety of reasons but it wasn't a schedule she could maintain long term. It is difficult for students to find a balance with the demands of school, employment and a healthy social life. This can often be especially challenging for students who are first in their family to earn a college degree and don't quite understand the value of good grades for getting into graduate school. Most students work more hours so that they don't have to take on debt, but the trade-off for their grades can be harmful. A 3.0 is usually the cut off for graduate school although some state school programs place the cut off at a lower point, and for professional schools –law, medicine, dental– the higher the GPA the better. A discussion of the trade-offs can be helpful. If a student can understand that an A instead of a B or a C will help them get into a graduate school and a career that helps them pay off the \$5000 - \$10,000 they had to borrow, then they may begin to see the 'investment value' of grades.
- 3. Attending information sessions:** It is always recommended that students attend information sessions as they will learn a tremendous amount about each program, the requirements for admissions and have an opportunity to get their questions answered. Information sessions also provide a great deal of implicit information about the culture of a program, its expectations and career opportunities that may result from graduation. Yet even if a student can't go to an information session at their top choice school because of travel costs, attending an information session at a similar program at a nearby school will result in important information about the discipline and the professional degree they wish to obtain. Information sessions often provide an opportunity to meet some of the faculty or graduate students or tour the department and the campus. If an information session isn't available, arranging a campus visit through a program coordinator is an excellent idea and this should be encouraged.

4. **Staying sensitive to needs of family and partners:** Many students interested in graduate school will have to consider the needs of families, children, partners and spouses as they make their decisions. Similar to all important changes, prospective students should discuss their intentions as early as possible and involve significant others in the planning process. Students who are moving a significant distance will have to consider various additional factors, including housing, employment for spouses and partners and potentially schools for children. If a student is considering a career as a professor, they should know that the professional trajectory usually includes many additional moves for jobs and other employment. Some students also have significant responsibilities with parents and extended family members they would leave behind if they moved. Helping students understand the career trajectory for a degree and career in which they have an interest is vital. Helping them assess the importance of their education and weighing it against other significant aspects of their lives can lead to a substantial discussion.

Additional notes: Once the discussion is concluded, instructors can reveal that Ashley did attend the information session at UC Davis School of Education and was admitted to the Teaching Credential/Masters program for Fall of 2015.