

Cindy Preto: Following your Interests and Passions Facilitator's Guide¹

Discussion

The case, *Cindy Preto: Following your Interests and Passions*, is an excellent narrative to present to former foster youth who are just beginning to think about graduate school. Many students will want to go into the helping professions because of their own experiences in the Child Welfare System, but with support programs available at the undergraduate level and assistance now becoming possible for graduate students, former foster youth may want to consider other career options. In Cindy Preto's case, she decided on her professional path by remembering enjoyable interests she had as a child, and the future work she anticipates doing in private industry is helping vineyards with pest control. Advisors and instructors can help students understand that all professions have value and they should not feel their only career prospects are with direct services for underserved communities. Preto's orientation is still towards assisting others. The case discussion could begin by asking students to consider something they enjoyed doing as a child, and how they could envision that becoming a career. This could help students begin searching for a professional path based on natural and implicit talents. Another important aspect of Cindy's undergraduate trajectory is the serendipitous manner in which she became involved in research through engaging in conversation with the Guardian Scholars Program advisor. Open to new ideas, Cindy was able to take advantage of an opportunity. Then, once she was involved in research and had proved herself, additional possibilities presented themselves. Another important factor in Cindy's case is her determination to participate in work that she cares about. Students should be encouraged to work on projects in which they have a sustained interest and are part of their overall career goals.

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

The case represents the academic career of Cindy Preto who is in the middle of thinking about her future. Returning to UC Davis to finish her undergraduate degree, Cindy had a strong idea about what she wanted to do, yet she didn't shy away from an opportunity. She jumped at the possibility to participate in MURALS, an undergraduate research and support program for students who are situationally disadvantaged.² The research she pursued allowed her future to open up, making graduate school a real possibility. Cindy built a relationship by working with a professor as an undergraduate, yet still needed to apply to the program. She took the GRE and had to qualify based on her GPA. Although most students will apply to a graduate program without this kind of relationship, talented undergraduates in the sciences are often asked to continue on in research projects in which they are already engaged.

What is important in Cindy's case, however, is her self-awareness and her insistence that she work on a project that has bearing on her future career. Students who are interested in advanced academic degrees should consider programs like MURALS. Although participation will not always lead to a supported research project similar to Cindy's, the research experience and mentorship provided will acquaint students with the skills they need to pursue a graduate degree and a network of academics they can ask for advice.

Pedagogy

The class discussion can address many of the various issues that arise from Cindy's case. Using the narrative as a jumping off point for a discussion of career choices could yield a rich conversation about how to think about future goals and how students see their professional lives developing. For many foster youth, the responsible adults in their lives have been social workers, teachers and lawyers. As a result, they are often drawn to similar careers or to other degrees in the helping professions that would allow them to improve the lives of the disadvantaged. Although this is admirable, students from a background in foster care should also be encouraged to pursue intrinsic interests and talents and not allow their pasts to dictate their futures. Below are some possible teaching points to address depending on what points the instructor wants to emphasize as well as the student population that is engaging with the case.

Teaching points:

1. How to discover a rewarding career path
2. Engaging with supportive staff and programs
3. Participating in research with the future in mind
4. Negotiating with professors and supervisors

² Mentorships for Undergraduate Research in Agriculture, Letters, and Science (MURALS) is a UC Davis pre-graduate opportunity program designed to enrich the research experience of students situationally disadvantaged in their access to graduate school. <http://success.ucdavis.edu/programs/murals/>

- 1. How to discover a rewarding career path:** With a decision to return to school and complete her undergraduate degree, Cindy had to decide what kind of program and professional career she wanted to pursue. Her manner of making a decision may not work for every student but it could be an interesting class exercise or homework assignment. Her first career choice, to become a winemaker, was elicited through considering what she liked to do in her adult life. Later, Cindy's childhood interest in bugs was brought to mind through taking a class in entomology. This helped her recall an unstructured and pleasant time in her life when she was able to explore with an innate curiosity and capability for learning. Similar to Cindy, many former foster youth face adversity early in life and their tumultuous life circumstances may inhibit their natural abilities and essential talents as they simply struggle to survive. Yet other students may not be able to access any time in their life when they felt relatively secure enough to explore. Students could also be asked what activities bring them pleasure and how they can envision this activity becoming a career. Favorite classes and books can help students to envision a future and simply 'trying on' various possibilities through internships, jobs, volunteer activities and shadowing can assist students who are beginning to think about a profession. Students should also be reminded that careers are trajectories and that people change jobs and responsibilities many times during their lives.
- 2. Engaging with supportive staff and programs:** Nearly all of the university campuses across California now have undergraduate support programs for former foster youth. Although each is structured differently, all of the programs have been developed to assist students with various aspects of the university educational experience. One of the most important aspects of providing support to students is helping them understand the variety of opportunities and resources at the university and how to take advantage of assistance offered by programs, professors and support staff. Many former foster youth are *not* accustomed to asking for help and often must be re-socialized and encouraged to understand how to access the assistance and resources available at a university. Class facilitators could provide an exercise to determine what kind of knowledge students have about various resources. A discussion about how to ask for assistance might also be appropriate for students.
- 3. Participating in research with the future in mind:** There are many avenues to research opportunities on a university campus. Taking a class with a professor can lead to an assistantship but the student will often have to inquire about the possibilities. Research opportunities may also be posted on department bulletin boards. Additionally, students can find assistance by asking their teaching assistants. Engaging in basic research to learn how a study is performed in a particular discipline is important and students may be able to employ skills they are learning in their classes such as qualitative interviewing, statistics, data analysis, or other quantitative skills. All this experience is helpful, and similar to other employment, the skills a student acquires on any given research project will be valuable in seeking additional opportunities. Like Cindy, however, students should begin to think about how the research they are assisting with, or conducting on their own, will fit with their future career goals.

4. Negotiating with professors and administrators: Younger students are often intimidated with the prospect of speaking with professors but they should be encouraged to begin learning these skills early. Going to office hours and taking time after class to talk with professors can help develop these capabilities. Finding a faculty mentor at a large research university can be difficult but professors will take an interest in a student if they feel they can be of help and if the students' interests parallel their own. Those students who want to go on in academia and pursue a Masters degree or PhD should definitely be encouraged to engage with professors on a regular basis, as a professor will ultimately be the supervisor for their advanced degree research. Students also need to learn to distinguish who are the keepers of various kinds of information at the university. For example, a professor will have disciplinary and some career information but will probably not know the requirements for certain degree paths or any of the bureaucratic information about finances or how to complete a degree.

Additional notes: Once the discussion is concluded, instructors can address Cindy's success in academia. The discussion with her professor presented in this case was successful and she was able to work on 'red blotch' for her Masters research project. A year into her Masters degree she decided to stay on for a PhD and is now engaged in a research project on the three-cornered alfalfa treehopper which has been shown to be the insect vector of red blotch virus in grapevines.