

Cristal Harris: Self-representation and Getting the most from Student Support Programs Facilitator's Guide¹

Discussion

The case, *Cristal Harris: Self-representation and Getting the most from Student Support Programs* highlights the determination of Cristal Harris as she puts herself on a path of educational success and learns to make use of student support programs. The issue Cristal faces at the beginning of the case is one of self-representation and self-reliance: how to represent her goal of attending the CLEO Summer Institute and raising enough funding to pay the full tuition. Cristal certainly exhibits a great deal of inner strength and purpose, yet she also has a profound understanding that it isn't just 'book knowledge' that allows one to succeed in higher education. A successful student needs 'tacit knowledge' that is gained only through interacting with those that know these implicit rules. She articulates this when she says that college has a 'culture' and that a student has to learn how to operate within that culture in order to do well. "It's not that some people aren't intelligent or aren't able to master a topic. Some people just never learn that it takes time to learn to do school well."

Too many students give up or don't do as well as they could because they don't understand the informal rules of academia. Student support programs are a way in which students can learn the 'culture' and get coaching on various aspects of academia that may not be readily apparent to someone who is a first-generation college student. The case represents a variety of student support programs and how students can benefit from these, as well as giving some particulars of the law school application process. The case can also be used as a jumping-off point for a discussion about how students should represent themselves, their experience in foster care and their career and professional goals.

Abstract

The case details the path of Cristal Harris who has been accepted to the CLEO Summer Institute but must find a way to pay full tuition. Despite difficulties growing up

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in foster care, Cristal has succeeded in higher education, in part because she has placed a great value on student support programs and learned how to leverage the opportunities they provide. Cristal is considering creating a fundraising website online which requires her to think about how she should represent herself and her professional goals. This is a big question for students who come from a background in foster care. It is often difficult for them to know how to represent their difficulties and the obstacles they have overcome. What may be appropriate for an application to an undergraduate program is not helpful on an application for an advanced degree. Graduate school applications also include fellowship and scholarship applications and a potential student must understand the best way to provide the reader with an understanding of the difficulties they have faced and at the same time, do it in such a way that indicates a confidence that they will continue to progress. This case provides readers with information about various student support programs and links to find out more about the law school application process. It can also be used to catalyze a discussion about Statements of Purpose, Personal Statements, Scholarship Applications (particularly those that ask for the applicant to discuss obstacles they have overcome and challenges they have faced), and self-representation in general.

Pedagogy

The class discussion should help students understand the different kinds of academic support programs that exist, the kind of help that is available, include a discussion of the Personal Statement and how it differs from a Statement of Purpose and what information should not be made explicit. The case explores the idea of the ‘culture of academia’ and how to become a good student and at the same time asks students to consider how they represent themselves and their academic and professional goals. The following are proposed teaching points with the order depending on the student population the instructor is teaching and the particular points the instructor wishes to emphasize.

Teaching points:

1. Finding guides and helpers
 2. Making use of student support programs
 3. Understanding the application requirements for a particular degree
 4. Starting early to develop a plan of action to meet requirements
 5. Representing yourself: writing Statements of Purpose and Personal Statements for the graduate school application
- 1. Finding guides and helpers:** Cristal’s journey through higher education reveals a variety of ways in which students who are first in their families to go to college and who attend the university without an extensive support system, can find help. Cristal is encouraged by a mentor in her high school who suggests she attend community college and make use of financial aid. Cristal also cites other individuals who made a difference in her academic achievement: a professor who helped her get a Federal Work-Study job, a mentor in the Delta Gold study room, and a law mentor with whom she develops a rapport. It is very easy for a student to feel lost on a large campus, but there are usually programs and people who are willing to help. Students

need to make these connections and cultivate relationships. Getting help is often about establishing rapport and having an administrator understand the kind of help one needs.

- 2. Making use of student support programs:** Cristal understands the value of student support programs and the way in which they can make the ‘culture’ of the university explicit to those who may not understand the implicit rules. In regards to finding a law school with a support program she says, “I want to be in a place where people will help me along and will be accessible if I have a question about something that might be simple for others, but is complicated for me.” Every student has to learn the particular way in which higher education operates and every school, program and discipline requires some adaptation. Higher education is a very different place for students who are first in their families to attend university and Cristal states this very succinctly. “It’s not that some people aren’t intelligent or aren’t able to master a topic,” she said. “Some people just never learn that it takes time to learn to do school well. You have to learn how to raise your hand, gain confidence, study in groups and take notes in class.” There are a variety of support programs with different purposes and Cristal has been able to leverage their support. Academic support programs like Delta Gold and the Guardian Scholars Program ensure academic success and can sometimes help with finances, the Center for Community College Partnerships helps students make decisions about transfers, and programs like the UCLA Law Fellows prepare students for specific graduate school and professional trajectories. Reading the case and noting all the different support programs and their purposes could help students see that there are supportive services all along the higher education path.
- 3. Understanding the application requirements for a particular degree:** Many students do not consider graduate school until they are in their junior or senior year or even after they graduate. Yet most programs have requirements that take time to complete and are often easier to do during the time a student is an undergraduate. The case details some of the basic requirements necessary for a law school application and gives the website address of the Law School Admission Council (LSAC) where students can find additional information. Students will also benefit from internships, summer jobs, summer educational programs, workshops, informational interviews and other kinds of pre-professional involvement in a discipline in which they have an interest. Students should be encouraged to explore not only through formal learning environments but through informal learning environments. Writing about their pre-professional experiences in a graduate school application can often indicate a certain kind of interest and engagement that is not reflected in the quantitative portion of the application by the GPA and GRE/LSAT/MCAT scores. Students should also be encouraged to look at the applications of programs at various universities as requirements and pre-requisites can vary from program to program.
- 4. Starting early to develop a plan of action to meet requirements:** Cristal laments that she didn’t have the LSAT score to back up her application, and encourages other potential applicants to start early. Particularly in the case of law school and medical school, an applicant’s quantitative representation is extremely important. Those

students interested in attending law school or medical school would benefit from an early familiarization with the respective exams. For other degree programs, the test scores could make a difference but may not be the most important factor in an application. Many programs post the average GRE and GPA of their incoming class or give a range of what is acceptable.

A GPA of 3.0 or higher is often the biggest road block that students from a background in foster care face. There are programs at the CSUs that do admit students with a lower GPA, and occasionally in other fields a significant accomplishment such as the publication of a book might trump a GPA. Even if a student isn't planning on applying to graduate school before they complete their undergraduate work, it is helpful to understand what might be required for various different paths in which one has an interest and even to complete some of the requirements. For example, if a student has an interest in teaching, many programs require classroom observation, or if a student is interested in the medical fields, volunteer work in a hospital or clinic builds an understanding of the profession and also presents well on an application. Students should be aware of the fact that many of these extra curricular activities or informal learning experiences are as important as the more formal work that they complete in a required class.

5. Representing yourself: writing Statements of Purpose and Personal Statements:

Law and Medical school usually ask for a Personal Statement that is basically a description of why an applicant wants to pursue that degree. Examples can be found on the website, Getting Prepared for Graduate School and other places on the web. Most UC campuses require both a Statement of Purpose and a Personal Statement for the PhD and Masters degree applications and excellent descriptions of both kinds of statement can be found at the UC Berkeley website with addresses at the end of this paragraph. These essays are an opportunity for an applicant to talk about their interests, motivations and passions, and both are ways for students to give admissions committees a more substantial understanding than can be found with a perusal of grades and test scores. For many programs, the statements also act as writing samples and the student is assessed not only on what they say, but how they say it, the style and if it is well-structured and thematically coherent. Students should write several drafts of their statements and get feedback and critique from professors and writing instructors if possible. Cristal has written an evocative personal statement and she was clearly successful with this kind of narrative. However, we usually caution students to be much more circumspect about their foster care experiences.

<http://grad.berkeley.edu/admissions/apply/statement-purpose/>

<http://grad.berkeley.edu/admissions/apply/personal-statement/>

Once the class discussion is complete, the instructor can share Cristal's gofundme site <http://www.gofundme.com/7x34c8> Cristal was successful in raising funds and was able to attend the CLEO summer institute. She will attend San Francisco University School of Law starting fall semester 2014.