

## **Hen Werner: Taking Educational Risks for the Future Facilitator's Guide<sup>1</sup>**

### **Discussion**

The case, *Hen Werner: Taking Educational Risks for the Future*, poses general questions about the financial risks of graduate education as well as providing details about the Teacher credential/Masters program at the UC Davis School of Education. The issue Hen Werner faces at the beginning of the case – whether to pursue a Masters degree in Education -- is a question that, at its core, is one she has faced all along the educational trajectory: what kind of risks (of time, finances and energy) can she afford in order to create a better life for herself and her family? In fact, Hen has shown remarkable tenacity and strength in obtaining a college education, slowly gathering credits at a community college and then accelerating her progress when she gained the support of a spouse and transferred to a four-year university. One way to begin the case would be to itemize all the considerations that will play into Hen's decision moving forward. Teachers with Masters degrees receive higher salaries, but to obtain the Masters a student may need a loan for the tuition. If Hen takes a teaching position she can afford the tuition, but if the job entails a long commute, her children might not get the care they need. If Hen doesn't get a job with a reasonable commute, is completing the Masters a good option as a future investment, and in fact, would it be better to put off employment so that she can have a more flexible schedule and ensure she can take care of her children? The case can be used as a specific example to help students understand the requirements of a teacher credential program, and more generally to indicate what kinds of questions about financial costs and risks they might ask of any graduate program.

### **Abstract**

The case details the educational journey of Hen Werner who has just completed the teacher credential program at UC Davis as she is introduced to the reader. The credential program is structured so that students generally move on to complete a Masters degree after they have finished the credential year and while they are in their first year of

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

teaching. Hen, however, is also a mother of two young children. She is excited about teaching and would like to obtain the Masters, but she is also concerned about additional time away from her children as the past year was quite demanding. Hen's own childhood and young adulthood were difficult and she wants to provide a better life for her children. As the case opens she is getting ready to hand deliver application materials to schools within a reasonable commuting distance where she would like to teach. Readers can learn a great deal about the requirements and structure of a teacher credential program but a general discussion about the values and risks of a graduate education can also be developed. Students should be asking specific questions when they are researching graduate programs not only about research and mentoring but about internships, graduate employment and future alumni networking opportunities, average salaries and professional development.

### **Pedagogy**

The class discussion can help students understand the kinds of questions they should be developing and the kinds of questions they should be asking as they research different kinds of career paths and graduate programs. As the case starts, Hen is at somewhat of a crossroads as to whether she should take on more debt and proceed with a Masters degree. Understanding her educational career trajectory and the historical choices she has made will help students test their own risk tolerance and understand their own abilities to make decisions and trade-offs. General points can be made about knowing the pre-requisites and planning ahead for tests. The following teaching points could be covered 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 academic support
2. Thinking about career options
3. Understanding the prerequisites
4. Leveraging local knowledge
5. Turning struggles into strengths
6. Analysing risks and rewards

- 1. Finding academic support:** Many former foster youth have unconventional or inadequate high school educations and a number, like Hen, have not attended high school at all. This puts them at a severe disadvantage when they get to college. Finding on-campus support is crucial and Guardian Scholars Programs can make the difference. Yet students can also find supportive faculty and administrators outside of these specified support programs that can be crucial in determining success. Hen found help with the encouragement of a faculty member in the anthropology department at her community college who gave her a useful perspective from which to see the world and also provided her some alternative learning strategies. The discussion around this point could allow students to describe people they consider supportive and how they found them, and also ask them to think through how they might seek out an informal or formalized mentor relationship in a new environment.

- 2. Thinking about career options:** Hen’s own struggle to get an education will help her be a clear voice of support in the classroom and her experience in foster care will help her be an advocate for other foster children and youth in the educational system. She arrived at the decision to explore a teaching career after some exploration of other careers through an internship in the social services. Former foster youth often refer to one of the ‘helping professions’ as their career choice, perhaps because of their own experiences and overt reliance on others – they often want to correct some aspect of the foster care system or alternatively, be as good as the social worker that helped them. Yet former foster youth should also be encouraged to explore other talents and professional avenues. One can be ‘helpful’ in many professions and a student’s life circumstances should not necessarily determine their career path.
- 3. Understanding the prerequisites:** At the time that Hen was admitted to the UC Davis School of Education Teacher credential/Masters program, the requirement was that an applicant had to be registered for the CSET tests but did not necessarily have to successfully completed all the subtests. Due to Hen’s unconventional education and the fact that she had never formally taken a class on the historical subject matter that is tested on the CSET social science, the tests proved to be difficult. Although she ultimately passed her tests before the deadline of the winter quarter, studying for the exams added additional stress to her first quarter in the program. Students who are interested in applying to graduate school programs need to carefully examine the stated prerequisites including required classes, necessary observation or volunteer work, GPA required, GRE or other test scores needed. Program websites often also provide average GPA and GRE scores of their admitted students and applicants should take this into consideration. There are also many factors in an application that are unstated: students wanting to do a PhD usually will need to have some research experience; medical applicants usually have volunteer time or actual experience in a medical setting; and law applicants have often worked in advocacy or legal clinics. Some advanced degree programs, however, are not as well defined in their qualifications but students can gain a great deal of knowledge about whether a program is a good fit (and whether they are a good fit for a program) by visiting the department, sitting in on classes and talking with faculty and graduate students.
- 4. Leveraging local knowledge:** Hen was able to pass her last CSET test in January not because she wrote an excellent essay on the topic provided, but because she knew how the test was graded and was able to ensure that she received enough points to pass. Leveraging local knowledge can also be applied to the graduate school application process and potential students need to understand the implicit knowledge about the particular graduate programs to which they are applying. Graduate school programs usually state their requirements but there is often some leeway concerning what is acceptable. Attending classes in a particular program, talking with graduate students and meeting with faculty and program administrators helps students understand expectations and how to create an application that will be competitive.

- 5. Turning struggles into strengths:** Graduate school applications usually require a Statement of Purpose and often a Personal History or Personal Statement as well. Applicants should know the difference and also carefully learn what kinds of information should appear in each. Former foster youth, in particular, need to learn how to contextualize the obstacles and adversity they have faced and sometimes to only hint at some of the difficulties or even only refer tangentially. Admissions committees can be squeamish and there is no reason to provide personal information that has no bearing on an applicant's academic qualifications. When former foster youth write about difficult experiences, they should show how this adversity has helped them grow as a person and in what ways this will help them make future contributions. How much an applicant writes about their experience also depends on the discipline or program to which they are applying. Because Hen is applying for a teacher credential program where her job may require working with foster youth, her statement is appropriate, in part, because she indicates how important teachers and education were to her. If she was submitting an application for a Masters in Biology she would write about her personal experience in an entirely different way.
- 6. Analyzing risks and rewards:** It is always difficult to determine the risks and rewards of any new endeavor because the future is uncertain. In Hen's case it is particularly difficult because she is trying to assess not only whether a financial investment in tuition is worth bigger pay-offs in the future, but she is also considering a big unknown – what affect will her working have on her children? The financial investment could be taught with some guestimate numbers about her husband's salary and the salary figures available in Appendix C, as well as guestimate numbers of monthly expenses. For example, if Hen's husband is making \$75,000 and Hen is making \$40,848 (Step 1, Class C) and both children are in childcare (estimate \$1,400/month per each child), and monthly expenses equal \$2,500, how long will it take them to pay off the debt? The point is not to get an actual figure as there are too many guestimates. The point is to help students think about some of the trade-offs and risks they will have to take. Additionally each person will have their own values about putting children in childcare. In thinking through what they might do in Hen's situation, students learn to apply the same strategies in their own lives.

**Additional notes:** Once the discussion is concluded, instructors can reveal that Hen's proactive job search activities did result in an interview with Elk Grove High School. She met with the principal on the morning of the UC Davis graduation and received a phone call during the ceremony, although she waited until it was over to retrieve the message. She was offered a job teaching history at Elk Grove High School and will start in the fall of 2014. She will also be working towards her Masters at UC Davis and complete the degree in Spring of 2015, an educational achievement that will boost her salary approximately 20%.