

Holly Pierce: The Importance of an Information Session Facilitator's Guide¹

Discussion

The case, *Holly Pierce: The Importance of an Information Session* describes the career trajectory of a re-entry student and her plans to move from homelessness to graduate student. Holly Pierce is a single mother intent on getting her life on a more stable path and her case contains many points of strategic interest as students consider their college careers. Holly is a resourceful person who has learned how to ask for help and knows that she is always just one question away from finding the answer that will move her a step closer to her goals. Compelled to find out more about the MSW program at Sac State, Holly decides to attend an Information Session.

Many professional programs – Masters in Social Work, Masters in Public Policy, Masters in Public Health and Teaching Credentials, among others – hold regularly scheduled Information Sessions. These are usually presented by program coordinators and sometimes faculty and are intended to give prospective applicants all the information they need to decide whether the program is a good fit and will help them along their intended career path. In addition to a scheduled presentation, Information Sessions usually provide a lengthy time for questions and answers and a chance for prospective students to introduce themselves to the administrators who will handle their applications. In addition, many programs record their Information Sessions and post them on their websites for those who can't attend. Going to an Information Session during early career exploration can help students understand more about a specific program as well as get a broad sense of the career path that a degree in the field offers. For a prospective student who is getting ready to apply, the Information Session offers an opportunity to engage with staff and get their unanswered questions resolved.

Abstract

Holly Pierce had considered getting a college degree for a long time before she finally took the first step and enrolled in one class at American River College. Uncertain

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.

whether she could handle the workload, Holly did well and continued to progress until advice from a counselor helped her understand her real passion. Transferring to UC Davis in order to complete her BA in sociology, Holly realized that she didn't have the time or leisure of students younger than herself. At forty with a teen-age daughter to raise, Holly took her studies seriously and approached the task of earning her degree with strategic intent. She moved to campus so she could gain an *in-situ* experience, applied for outside scholarships so as not to affect the funding she was already receiving, and thought carefully about how to manage her time and her classes. Her success was its own reward. Nearing the end of her studies, Holly began to prepare an application for an MSW taking the same careful and methodical approach. She asked lots of questions, attempted to understand what was ahead and was willing to accept the help that was offered.

Pedagogy

The class discussion can prompt questions along many strategic lines of thinking including how to manage one's time in college between working and studying, and what kind of pre-professional training can be useful when applying for an advanced degree. Another topic of interest might be how to determine what kinds of scholarships and opportunities are available and what some of the implicit benefits might be. The case can be used to help students to think about the types of information that will be important to them when considering different degree programs. Students can be asked to think about the following:

- What are the prerequisites and what kind of pre-professional experience do I need?
- What do students with this degree do when they graduate?
- What kind of funding will be available to pay for my graduate education?
- Do students complete the degree in the required length of time?
- What kind of final project – theses or exam is expected?
- Does this degree prepare me for a professional license?

Teaching points:

1. Understanding what counts as pre-professional experience
 2. Using scholarships and grants to fund undergraduate and graduate degrees
 3. Time management
 4. Why Information Sessions are important and what kinds of questions a prospective student should ask.
- 1. Understanding what counts as pre-professional experience:** One of Holly's biggest concerns was that she didn't have the work experience necessary to be accepted into the MSW program. Some degree programs explicitly state that potential applicants need a specific kind of pre-professional work experience and even how many hours are required. For example, many physician assistant studies programs specify the kinds of work that are acceptable and that a prospective applicant must have 1000 hours in that particular role. For other programs, the requirements might be implicit or only apparent once the applicant goes to fill out the form and finds a specific question about previous work on the online application. For PhD applicants, it is generally assumed that the student has completed a supervised research project or has taken a substantial role on the research project of a faculty member. Even if pre-

professional experience isn't *specified* it is still helpful to have completed some kind of pre-professional work in the field of study to which the applicant is applying, particularly if a student has earned a degree that is only tangential to the discipline they wish to pursue as a graduate student. Admissions committees want to see that potential students are committed to their studies, have the aptitude and ability, and are determined to complete the rigorous course of study that is a part of all graduate degrees. A discussion of what kind of pre-professional work is necessary for any particular degree might prompt students to both discover that requirement and look for internships or other opportunities to bolster their applications. In Holly's case, her volunteer work at Serna Village was applicable even though it was not done through a paid position. Often times, a volunteer or gratis position will still give a student the experience and is acceptable as pre-professional experience.

- 2. Using scholarships and grants to fund undergraduate and graduate degrees:**
Holly quickly assessed that scholarship funding did not necessarily increase the amount of money that had been budgeted through her financial aid offer. This made her reluctant to apply for grants and scholarships that were provided through UC Davis. Instead she searched for outside sources of funding and became particularly good at telling her story in a compelling way. Scholarship funding, however, does not only provide a student with more money, a fact that Holly also pointed out. Receiving a scholarship can help a student begin to develop a track record of sponsorship, a record that is particularly important for students going into academia where applying for grants and fellowships is expected and is a part of the normal workload. Creating this track record of success is important as many funders do not want to be the first to commit to a project or a person, but are more likely to award funding to an already successful endeavor or applicant.
- 3. Time management:** Holly's desire to obtain excellent grades while still having quality time with her daughter created a need to closely examine where she spent her time and where she resided during the completion of her undergraduate degree. Living on campus allowed her ease of access to the library, professors and other students and cut down on the time and expense of commuting. She also made the decision not to work, realizing that the time she would spend on her schoolwork getting excellent grades was a better investment than the small amount of money she could make working part-time. This is often a very difficult discussion to have with younger students as they don't quite realize that an excellent GPA is an important component of future success. Many students don't have graduate school on their near future radar and are only intent on the short-term goal of completing their undergraduate degree. Yet it is near impossible to change a GPA and getting an average lower than a 3.0 seriously inhibits graduate school choices if a student decides to apply later in their career. If students can limit their work hours to 10 hours a week they will have a much better chance of completing their undergraduate degree with a GPA that can help them gain admission to many graduate programs.
- 4. Why Information Sessions are important and what kinds of questions prospective student should ask:** Prospective applicants to any advanced degree

program gain most of their information from the program website. These websites contain a great deal of information including prerequisites, course of study, GPA and GRE requirements, admissions statistics, application questions and scheduled deadlines. Most websites also have FAQs that contain commonly asked questions. For applicants for whom questions remain or who want to ask about special circumstances, Information Sessions are a particularly useful resource. The program staff – coordinators, directors, administrators – are usually far more knowledgeable about the program requirements and logistics than many faculty who are mostly concerned with the content of their discipline not the context. Making contact with program administrators is also helpful if questions arise later in the application process. Yet even if an applicant doesn't have any remaining questions after reviewing all the website information, an Information Session can provide a window into the expectations and feel of any particular program and school. Potential applicants should take advantage of Information Sessions for the implicit information they might gain about the program that will help them to determine fit and also how to create the most competitive application.

Additional notes: Once the discussion is concluded, instructors can reveal that Holly Pierce achieved her goal of attending Sac State and started in the Fall of 2015.