

Rachelle Donaldson: The Importance of a Campus Visit¹

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Rachelle Donaldson glanced at her watch and then, for the third time, went over the mental checklist of the things she needed to bring for the next few days.² It was only a five-hour drive from Arcata, California to the city of Davis, near Sacramento, but Rachelle felt as if she was at the beginning of a big change. A senior at Humboldt State University, Rachelle was in the midst of applying for a Masters degree program in Community Development at UC Davis. Advised that a campus visit might heighten her chances of admission, she had decided to take advantage of the opportunity. “Notebooks, pens, cellphone...” Rachelle mumbled out loud as she looked through her bag. Assured that everything was there, she packed her car quickly, then turned onto Highway 101 and headed south.

Rachelle knew that a campus visit wasn’t necessary for all advanced degree programs unless a student simply wanted to get a sense of a campus and its surrounding area. Each kind of advanced degree had its own kind of application procedure and a student needed to know the process and prerequisites for a program once they had determined an interest. In the case of professional schools, many offered information sessions and students visiting a program in public policy, a law school or a school of management might also be able to sit in on classes and meet with faculty and graduate students.

The MS degree in Community Development was an eclectic degree that Rachelle felt would allow her to develop skills in advocacy for California’s community of existing foster youth and children as well as those that were working their way through the state’s educational system. Rachelle didn’t have a well-defined goal as to exactly what kind of career she would pursue post-graduation, but she knew that getting experience advocating for former foster youth was her passion and where she wanted to make a contribution.

Prior to her journey south, Rachelle had browsed the program’s website and found several faculty who she felt could be good mentors. She had written ahead to introduce

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² This case uses an alias in the place of the student’s real name.

herself and scheduled time for meetings. She had also contacted the program coordinator who had organized some of the graduate students in the department to take Rachelle out to lunch and tell her more about their own educational experiences in the department.

“I think I’m ready for a new adventure,” she thought to herself as she passed through Leggett while still travelling south on Highway 101. Rachelle thought over the last two years at Humboldt State where she had done well in her studies and taken a leadership role on campus. Her tenure as an undergraduate was nearly over and she was anxious to begin preparation for her professional life. At Redwood Valley, Rachelle turned off Highway 101 to head east onto Highway 20, before taking another right and turning south onto Highway 5 towards Davis.

Early years and Foster Care

Rachelle had just turned eight when her parents divorced, and she eventually became a ward of the court. Placed in foster care, Rachelle moved from group home to group home, sometimes as often as every six months, spending some of that time in Australia, where her family was from originally. Over the years, she ended up attending nine different high schools. “The constant moving around and being placed in so many different environments was a real struggle,” Rachelle said. Still she managed to complete her degree by the time she aged out of care at age 18.

Junior College, Life Experience and the Educational Journey

Unfortunately, Rachelle’s lack of preparation for higher education made junior college difficult. She often dropped out of classes or did not receive the grades she desired. Navigating the college system was also problematic so she finally decided to take a break and found work as a waitress and supervisor. But her desire for a better life sent her back to school and this time she was highly motivated and did well. “I wasn’t going to be happy in the future if I had to work as a waitress or a supervisor of a tanning salon,” she said. “I always had a passion for helping people so when I went back to school, I decided to become a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA).”

Her work as a CNA was satisfying and she was successfully employed in a doctor’s office before life circumstances created another change of plans. Shortly after her twenty-fifth birthday, Rachelle received information that her mother had been diagnosed with stage 3 lung cancer, a fact that made her think seriously about her future decisions. “I had never had a strong relationship with my mother, but this was a wake-up call,” Rachelle said. “I knew that if I didn’t do something to try and repair the relationship and then my mom didn’t make it through, I would regret it for the rest of my life.” For Rachelle, there seemed to be only one choice open. She was living in Redondo Beach at the time so she packed up her household and moved back to Santa Barbara to be closer to her mother.

The re-location proved to be a wise decision as Rachelle assisted in her mother’s recovery, strengthened their bond, and was also able to resume her own education at the local community college. With a better understanding of how a university bureaucracy

operated and a more thoughtful direction, Rachelle began to flourish, raising her GPA to 3.0 by the time she graduated with an Associates degree in applied communications.

Yet, once again, Rachelle felt at odds. The AA was an accomplishment, but it didn't significantly affect her employment options. Inspired by her then-boyfriend, who had completed his chiropractic education before he was twenty-five, she moved to Humboldt, California to be closer to him and his family. The move also included a plan to continue her education at Humboldt State University where she would enroll and complete her BA in Communication.

This new beginning jump-started Rachelle's educational life and she began to excel in every class. As her confidence grew and "A" grades became the standard, she began to participate in more extra-curricular activities, joining the debate team and the logging sports team. She also took on the role of President of the ELITE Scholars Club, the campus undergraduate support program for former foster youth. (ELITE is an acronym for Excelling and Living Independently Through Education.) By the time she graduated, Rachelle had earned a 3.94 at CSU Humboldt and had raised her overall GPA to 3.55.

How to Think About the Future?

At the beginning of her senior year, with graduation soon approaching, Rachelle began to consider her options. "I am the first person in my family to attend college and I was someone who never in my wildest dreams thought I would consider graduate school, Rachelle said. "But I realized that is what I needed to do."

Her first thought was to pursue a degree in one of the helping professions, such as an MSW or MFT, but once she discovered the Master of Science in the Community Development program at UC Davis, Rachelle thought she had found a home. The interdisciplinary program would allow her the freedom to take a variety of classes and focus her research on a topic in which she had an interest. The program also required that she complete an internship. This would give her an opportunity to get hands on training in an organization that worked on issues Rachelle cared about, such as access to higher education for former foster youth. Knowing that a campus visit would provide her with valuable information and heighten her chances of acceptance, she began to plan her trip.

Setting Up the Campus Visit

Rachelle first contacted the Community Development Graduate Coordinator, Carrie Ruport-Armstrong, who acted as a point person, suggested classes to visit, and introduced her to a couple of graduate students as she developed her itinerary. (see **Exhibit A**) Rachelle also contacted professors whose research projects had some connection to her own interests. She had already started the online application and had a rough draft of her Statement of Purpose and Personal History Statement. (see **Exhibit B for completed essays**) She knew the campus tour was a way of introducing herself to important decision makers and would provide her with useful information. She would also be able to get insider knowledge from some of the current graduate students, sit in on classes and get a feel for campus life and the surrounding community.

Exhibit A: Itinerary of Meetings for Campus visit

Wednesday 11/6/13:

- 9:00 -10:00 am: Meeting with Dr. Sylvia Sensiper, Director of the Guardian Professions Program
10:15 -10:45 am: Meeting with Carrie Armstrong-Ruport (program coordinator)
12:00 -12:50 pm: Sit in on CRD 290
2:10 - 4:00 pm: Sit in on CRD 240

Thursday 11/7/13:

- 9:00 -10:30 am: UC Davis Campus Tour
10:45 -11:30 am: Meet with Carolyn Penny (and possibly her associate Sharon)
12:00 -1:00 pm: Lunch with current CD masters student
1:30 pm: Meet with Todd (current CD masters student)

Exhibit B: Application Essays

Statement of Purpose

I am the first and only person in my family to have gone to college, and doing well in educational pursuits is something I have truly become passionate about. I am interested in the UC Davis Master of Science in Community Development as I believe it will help me work towards a career in a nonprofit concerned with social welfare and under-served communities.

I have always been interested in helping others, an enthusiasm that may have grown from my own experience as a former foster youth. I am licensed as a Certified Nurse Assistant (CNA) and worked as a professional in that field for a number of years. I have found, however, that my skills as a leader, including my ability to organize and motivate people, are what I want to cultivate as I move forward in my career.

There are two experiences that have led to my understanding of myself as a leader. In 2011, I was hired by the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society to be a mentor for a team of girls that was training to participate in a marathon. As a mentor I met with my mentees weekly at trainings, helped them reach their fundraising goal of \$2,500 per person and made sure they had all the required tax documents to give to donors. I truly enjoyed this experience as I found something that was inspiring and benefited others.

Currently, I am serving my second year as the president of the ELITE Scholars club. ELITE is an acronym for Excelling and Living Independently Through Education and the club is comprised of former foster, group home, and special circumstances youth. Our mission is to support each other and provide resources and information to help people from disadvantaged backgrounds to succeed. It is my responsibility to handle administrative tasks and set an example, especially for new members. To do so, I have built relationships with staff and faculty around the campus and community that have allowed me to find out about opportunities and events that can help members of the club. In addition, we help others, volunteering at the local continuation schools by working in the classrooms for at-risk youth and holding workshops and panels for youth when they visit the university. We find our club members are able to have successful connections with these students because we have experienced many of the same hardships they have.

I believe that the experience I have gained by being on my universities debate team has also given me leadership skills in thinking quickly and critically on difficult issues. I have been trained to think about topics from many sides and to strategize around what my opponent's arguments may be.

Graduate studies will help me build on my personal experience in overcoming adversity and gain a substantive understanding of the issues facing under-served communities. I am particularly interested in Community and youth participation, Political ecology, Social movements, and Nonprofits, and my goal is to assist marginalized communities. I am particularly interested in the work of Professor Jonathan London whose work on conflicts in marginalized and rural community is close to my own. Michael Rios' work with Sacramento's immigrant and refugee's communities will also influence my thinking, and I believe I can gain a deeper understanding of mediation, leadership and negotiation studying with Carolyn Penny and her work with Common Ground. After visiting the campus in November and having the pleasure of sitting in on

one of Frank Hirtz's classes, I also feel that I would gain essential knowledge of Research methods and other information parallel to my interests in Policy and Social welfare that will help me in my future career path.

I hope to apply what I learn in my academic studies in real world settings and plan to find internships in the greater Sacramento area. In addition to working in the nonprofit world I would be interested in working for the state or city government because I believe one needs to see many sides of policy in addressing community needs.

Personal Statement

The first time someone meets me, I can almost guarantee they do not think this is a young woman who went to nine different high schools. They also do not imagine that my life experience includes living on two continents, and spending the majority of my formative years in foster homes and group homes as a ward of the court until emancipation at age 18. I doubt they would imagine that I am the first and only person in my biological family to have gone on to college and receive a degree. Statistics show that only 3% of former foster youth graduate with a Bachelors Degree, and even fewer go on to graduate school. Not only am I determined to help break that stereotype, but I am unwavering in my goal to have a career that makes positive change in other people's lives.

My formative years in the US and Australia have given me a broadened view of the world. I have lived in a place where there is universal health coverage, and seen the positive and negative effects first hand. I have seen the results of different kinds of policies for the poor and different educational strategies to decrease unemployment. Growing up in group homes and foster homes, I have lived with many people of different races, personalities, and preferences, all of which allows me to better connect with all types of individuals.

In fact, all this life experience has given me some truly positive traits. It is very easy for me to be sympathetic and empathetic when talking to people and I can be flexible and adapt to my surroundings easily. I have a better understanding of the issues, concerns and interests of others which allows people to easily trust and confide in me, knowing that I am not pretending to care or pretending to show interest. It has also shown me how there is such a great need for programs that help to bring up individuals in disadvantaged situations, and what can happen when they do not receive the resources and attention they need. When people do not have a way to bring themselves up from the bottom, they will generally stay there instead of believing that they can make a better life for themselves.

I know that one of the biggest challenges in life is to create positive change in the face of what seems to be an insurmountable challenge. I realized this when I helped my mother recover after she was diagnosed with stage 3 lung cancer a couple of years ago, having already battled thyroid cancer and a brain tumor. First, I moved back to Santa Barbara, overcoming a vow to myself that I would never return to a place that held so many difficult memories for me, and then my mother and I joined Team in Training, a charitable part of the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society that helps raise money for cancer research. Our goal to complete a half marathon was accomplished when we crossed the finish line, mother and daughter, holding hands and walking together because she could

not physically run. It was one of the best moments and achievements in my life, symbolizing so much more than just the completion of a race.

That moment, and that organization, helped me realize I am much stronger emotionally, mentally, and physically than I imagined and something clicked. My goal to help other people succeed in whichever way is possible came into focus as I know that having someone believe in you and fight for you can actually make or break you. I want to be that person who helps as many people as I possibly can.

I see myself working as a liaison, mediator, running a non-profit, or working for the government. I believe to really make a difference you have to climb the ladder and hold higher positions in order to help to make the hard decisions. And who better to do this than someone who has lived the life of those who we are trying to help. The Community Development Graduate Program can give me the tools to make this happen and I hope that I am given the opportunity to follow my passion and truly make some positive changes in this world.