

Rachelle Donaldson: The Importance of a Campus Visit Facilitator's Guide¹

Discussion

The case, *Rachelle Donaldson: The Importance of a Campus Visit*, helps inform readers about the opportunity to make a campus visit and what can be accomplished. As mentioned in the case, many professional degree programs – law school, Master in public policy, MSW – have regularly scheduled information sessions. These can take the form of presentations with questions and answers or more elaborate introductions that involve campus tours and meetings with current graduate students. If a program doesn't have a formal information session planned, however, there still may be an opportunity to make a campus visit and Rachelle's case includes some of the steps to setting up meetings with professors, administrators and students. The short case may also be an inspirational story for students who have had difficulties in making their way through higher education. At each step of her trajectory, Rachelle wasn't sure of her direction but she continued to push forward and to ask questions as she discovered a path that seemed most in line with her passions and her desire to be an advocate for foster youth. Students who have varied and eclectic educational backgrounds can often improve their chances of admissions by making a campus visit.

Abstract

Rachelle Donaldson knew that higher education was the path to the career and life that she wanted but she wasn't quite clear about her end goal.² Her first experience with community college was difficult and she did not get the grades she desired or feel she was going in the right direction. Once she set a goal and was motivated, however, becoming a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) boosted her confidence and helped her to return to her education with new resolve to finish her AA. A close relationship also inspired her to continue her journey and complete her BA at Humboldt State University. Rachelle's involvement in the undergraduate ELITE Scholars Program (Excelling and

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.

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

Living Independently Through Education), provided both support during her studies as well as opportunities for growth as she took on a leadership role as the President of the club. Finally, after excelling in her classes, Rachelle realized that a graduate degree was within her reach, and decided to apply for the Master of Community Development even though she initially thought otherwise. “I was someone who never in my wildest dreams thought I would consider graduate school.”

Pedagogy

This case does not pose an overt issue or question in the opening but simply includes the fact that Rachelle will increase her opportunity for admission if she makes a campus visit. There are many students who may identify with Rachelle and her uncertainty about her academic abilities. Some students have excellent high school records but then falter when they move to college and have to re-structure their lives and expectations as they learn to take care of themselves. Other students have had difficulties in high school and living in restrictive environments, but once they are on their own, they seem to find their strengths. Many former foster youth have erratic and uneven transcripts and educational records due to the instability of their early lives or continuing difficulties with family members. Many, like Rachelle, learn how to succeed, but then still have to internalize this new self-image in order to continue.

Students may also identify with Rachelle’s sense of duty to assist her mother, another issue which can cause delays or interfere with a student’s educational progress. The class discussion can prompt questions and dialogue about various issues that Rachelle’s educational trajectory brings to the fore. 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 help if a student is struggling in school
 2. Taking time to take care of important life matters
 3. Researching campus programs
 4. Planning a campus visit
-
1. **Finding help if you are struggling in school:** Many former foster youth have unstable living conditions throughout their K-12 years. Finding assistance can be daunting and many students will simply internalize their failures and not seek help. However, students should be made aware of the fact that most university campuses now have many services to assist students. The discussion can be broad-based as students need to feel comfortable asking for help with their academic work, with medical issues, and with emotional or psychological matters that arise. A general discussion about how to find campus resources and assistance in a new environment would be helpful for all students.
 2. **Taking time to take care of important life matters:** Students may have to take time off from school to take care of family members who are having difficulties or even may have to take time off for themselves. Thinking strategically about these breaks from school is important because there are often institutional requirements that must

be met. On the other hand, some students try to deal with emergencies and difficult situations while staying in school but then end up neglecting their academic work and getting substandard grades. It is important to think through the issues and time constraints and try to understand the consequences of various decision paths.

- 3. Researching campus programs:** Students may know the kind of advanced degree they want to pursue or they may simply have an idea of an area of study or a direction. There are search engines for both the CSU system and the UC system on the Getting Prepared for Graduate School website under the tab Timeline. Using these search engines students can find similar programs across the system rather than going to each campus website. The UC search engine's keyword search allows one to search across disciplines for a common theme such as 'community.' Students should also explore program options through talking with advisors, graduate student Teaching Assistants and going to career fairs.
- 4. Planning a campus visit:** Campus visits can be particularly useful for students whose transcripts may have irregularities or huge gaps in time. Doing the footwork to plan a campus visit can seem difficult and time-consuming but the pay-off can be worth it. Students who visit campus programs are seen as committed and industrious and making a good in-person impression can really help when admissions decisions are made. Some program admissions committees include administrators and graduate students in addition to professors, so even if a student doesn't meet with a potential mentor during their stay, a visit may influence a committee's decision. As well, the visiting student can learn a tremendous amount about the program, the career trajectories of graduating students, and get an idea of the surrounding community. Making a campus visit before applying is an excellent way to assess whether the program is a good fit, but even visiting after a student has been accepted can be a worthwhile endeavor. Some students get multiple offers and graduate programs often have 'admit days' which are pre-orientation events for all students who have gained admission.

Additional notes: Once the discussion is concluded, instructors can reveal that Rachelle's campus visit was successful. She gained admission to the Community Development Graduate Group at UC Davis and will graduate in summer of 2016.