

REFLECTING ON COLLEGE AND MY TIME IN CEP

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Introduction

It still hasn't quite sunk in for me yet. Perhaps it's because of the scramble to finish my final reports and finalize my senior project, but to me it doesn't really feel like I'm just a week away from graduation. We just had our senior farewell ceremony for the professional business fraternity that I am a part of, and the advice that I offered to my fellow brothers who weren't graduating, especially the younger ones, was that you shouldn't expect to come out of college with the same plan you had going in. That was certainly one of the biggest things I took away from my four years here at the University of Washington, and while this bit of hindsight is of little use to me now, I found it rewarding to be able to reflect back on my experiences at UW, so that is what I'll do more in depth here.

The Beginning

For as long as I can remember, whenever I was asked the question, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" my response always involved some sort of engineering. Even in preschool my very first dream job was to become a "train engineer." I had grown up under the idea that I was supposed to do well in school, go to a good college, get a degree in science, technology, engineering, business, medicine, or anything else that would allow me to get a good job out of college, make a comfortable living, and make my parents proud. I remember applying to colleges during my senior year of high school. I spent hours on researching what were the top engineering programs and was hoping to go to California for school. I ended up

being rejected from everywhere except UW, but it didn't take me long to grow appreciative for being able to go the school that I had once considered my "backup." Being able to go to school in the city that I grew up in and was familiar with along with having a large contingent of my graduating high school class coming to UW helped me feel truly comfortable going into my first year of college. Plus, UW had a fairly good engineering program as well, so I was happy with how things had turned out.

Civil Engineering

One of my favorite games growing up as a kid was SimCity 4. I had spent countless hours of my childhood growing my digital cities from nothing to thriving metropolises, and one of my favorite aspects of the game was managing my cities' traffic problems. So, when it came time to apply to an engineering program, I knew I wanted to ultimately work with cities and transportation for my career, so civil engineering became my major of choice. After applying at the end of my freshman year, I was accepted to Civil and Environmental Engineering under "Early Admission" for my sophomore year.

I remember the first day of class in my sophomore year. I was so excited to finally be taking dedicated engineering prerequisites such as Statics, Kinematics and Dynamics, and Mechanics of Materials. I thought to myself, "This is it. I've made it. I'm finally going to start my journey on becoming an engineer!" But I learned very quickly that becoming an engineer would not be as exciting as it had originally sounded to me, and my grades began to reflect this. It turns out that engineering involves a lot of math, and while I had always done well in the subject throughout elementary, middle, and high school, I never really enjoyed it. The hours of

sitting through lectures and crunching numbers at home began to take a toll on my motivation and excitement towards earning an engineering degree, and by the middle of spring quarter in my sophomore year, I had hit the low point of my college career. This was the first time I had ever truly questioned the direction I was heading, and my grades had been in a steady decline ever since that first feeling of excitement sitting in the first day of class that year. I began considering looking for an escape from the hours of lectures and textbook problems that had been the majority of my educational experience that year, but I knew at the time that I still wanted to be able to work with cities for my career. A quick Google search of “UW urban planning” led me to an interesting program called “Community, Environment & Planning.” Having the security of already being admitted to the Civil Engineering program, I was still trying to salvage my what would have been my worst academic quarter at UW, so I initially held off on applying to CEP. But the academic freedom and the idea of a community-based learning environment kept me interested in the program, and after scheduling a meeting with one of the program assistants, I finally decided to apply in May. A few weeks later, I received my acceptance email, bringing me a bit of relief in a quarter where I was struggling academically. However, the hardest decision I had to make was physically walking into Schmitz Hall and withdrawing myself not just from spring quarter, but from the Civil Engineering program as well. Immediately at the time, I wasn’t sure if I was making a huge mistake. I wasn’t sure if I was just being lazy and didn’t want to accept the difficulty that comes with earning a college degree. But as the year came a close and the decision that I made began to sink in, I started to believe that it was probably the right decision for me, and looking back on it now, I know it was one of the best decisions of my life.

Urban Planning

The first day of CEP gave me a renewed sense of excitement about my college education. I found myself much happier in this new, collaborative learning environment, and found it confidence-inspiring to have a community of students there to support me. I spent the majority of my junior year taking urban planning, GIS, and planning practicum courses to prepare me for my career in planning. Everything was going smoothly and I was feeling comfortable with where I felt I was going. This would change, however.

Towards the end of my junior year, I wanted to make sure I had a planning internship lined up for the summer. I had applied to at least a dozen or so positions, namely with the City of Seattle. I felt confident in my chances since I had just completed two quarters of planning practicum studios. The experience I gained from those projects was invaluable, and I was able to show the work that my fellow team-members and I had done in a booklet that I took into my interview with the Seattle Department of Transportation. I felt that I had impressed my interviewers and was looking forward to hearing back from them soon. But as the weeks went by and summer rolled around, I was still waiting for a call. I ended up having to take an unpaid, part-time position with the City of Redmond. But a few days later, I received a call from my would-be supervisor offering me a position at SDOT. It turns out the person who they initially offered the position to dropped out the day before they were scheduled to start. But regardless, I remember how excited I was getting to get the call.

The rest of my summer was spent working full-time at SDOT. At first, I was excited to finally be in the real world working for not just any planning agency, but the City of Seattle. I

spent the first few weeks learning or doing something new almost every day. From taking notes while walking along Seattle's multi-use trails, to marking where to have bike racks installed, I felt like I was working towards furthering my career in the planning field. However, as the summer dragged on, I began to feel the nine-to-fives from Monday through Friday grow longer and longer. After many weeks, I found that that, while the work wasn't boring, I never truly felt engaged or wanting to take on more. The excitement had faded and what had originally seemed like a great learning experience began to feel like just a job that came with a paycheck at the end of every two weeks. I began to feel restless and started to question the goal I had of becoming a planner. However, I continued working at SDOT part-time into my senior year as it was scheduled to be a one-year internship.

New Ideas

Midway through my senior year, I had a revelation of sorts that began with the class I believe had the most profound impact on me, Ethics and Identity. The course explored the ideas of right versus wrong and the value systems we use to judge how we make decisions and live our life. One particular argument resonated strongly with me and it was Immanuel Kant's Categorical Imperative. He provided one example in particular in which he claims that cultivating one's talents is a duty of ours as individuals. I immediately thought of my passion for film and videography. They were things that I had always had a natural talent for, and at a time when I began to feel uncertain about my career path once again, this idea served as a catalyst leading me to once again reevaluate the direction I was headed in.

On top of the worry that came with contemplating whether planning was the right career path for me, I also found myself unsure of what I was going to do for my senior project, and after a less than thrilling summer at SDOT, I wasn't too excited about the idea of doing another project around transportation or planning. I had somewhat considered the idea of possibly doing another video. But I was approaching the end of my four years in college and was already starting my career in planning. Nonetheless, I went through the first quarter and a half of my senior year structuring my senior project around a promotional video for CEP. Looking back on that time, I don't think I was allowing myself to become too excited about doing a video. All throughout CEP, I was working towards the goal of preparing myself to become a planner in the real world. But after that long summer of working 40-hour weeks and gaining some real-world experience through my internship, I was stuck in a sort of limbo where I wasn't sure if that was what I really wanted the next foreseeable portion of my life to look like.

Change of Plans

One day it just clicked. I believe I was watching some Crash Course Film School videos one night when I came across a recommended video of Steven Spielberg giving speech where he described his childhood, playing with Lionel trains and making movies on his parents' old film camera. At this point, this was the coolest part of his speech as I too recalled playing with my own Lionel trains as a kid and making videos with my parents' tape camcorder. But the next part of his speech is what really captivated me, and he finished by saying this:

When you have a dream, it doesn't often come at you screaming in your face: *'This is who you are. This is what you must be for the rest of your life.'*

Sometime a dream almost whispers. And I've always said to my kids: The hardest thing to listen to, your instincts, your human personal intuition, always whispers, it never shouts. Very hard to hear. So, you have to, every day of your lives, be ready to hear what whispers in your ear. It very rarely shouts. And if you can listen to the whisper, and if it tickles your heart, and it's something you think you want to do for the rest of your life, then that is going to be what you do for the rest of your life, and we will benefit from everything you do.

After letting his words sink in, I remember sitting in my chair after and thinking to myself, "You know what? I'm going to apply to film school. I'm going to take this passion and skill that I have for videography and run with it. I'm going to pour my heart and my soul into this thing that I've already enjoyed doing my whole life and see where it takes me, because I don't want to work just to make a living. I want my work to be my living, and through it, I want to be able to express myself as an individual and as a human."

Just like that, I had flipped the switch. And after having spent the first half of the year not letting myself get too excited about my senior project, I was finally able to see my video as not just a requirement to graduate, but as a culmination of my experience in CEP and as a stepping stone towards applying to film school.

Moving Forward

I'm coming out of college less certain about my future than I was coming in. I don't know where this path will take me, but I do know that, as a part of me, film is something I will always continue to pursue. Being someone who always compares their work to others', I know

there is still an incredible amount for me to learn. But with every shot, promotional video, or short film, I know I'll be able to see improvements in both my aesthetic style as well as storytelling ability. Even looking back now, I can see how far I've come from making videos for my high school English class or even from the first video I made while in college. I've already grown so much as a filmmaker just in the past year, and I can't imagine how much I will have grown in four years after graduating from film school. Of course, I worry about whether or not I will be successful and be able to earn a living to support myself and the people I care about. But at this point in my life, pursuing my passions and developing myself as a filmmaker is what I believe I need to be doing. It's what I believe is my purpose. And I don't think I would have been able to discover that without CEP.

To me, the beauty of this major is that it teaches its students to think for themselves and gives them the confidence to take on challenges in their professions, communities, and personal lives. This ability to think independently along with the support of my fellow classmates allowed me to make the decision to fully commit myself to pursuing film. I absolutely would not have been able to take this risk without a program that gave me the freedom and support to do so, and I will forever be grateful for my time and experience here in CEP. Who knows where I would be if I had not made the switch from Civil Engineering two years ago. CEP taught me to trust myself, take risks, and be intentional about the things that I want to do. The path I've chosen now might not have the clearest view of what lies ahead. But I know that at the end of it all, I will be doing what I love, making people laugh, cry, and smile through film, and it's all thanks to CEP.