

Student Life: Is There Time for Reflection?

It seems reasonable to resurrect the cliché “stop and smell the roses” in light of today’s students’ hectic pace. Particularly, faculty members and student advisors have a responsibility to help students think about their desires, goals, and ambitions

by **Cathy A. Enz**

THE DAY BEFORE exam week a student, whom I’ll call Adam, walked into my office. Adam had slept very little during the previous week, as he had worked hard preparing for exams. He looked thin, had a cold, hadn’t shaved, and was generally exhausted. He, like almost all of my undergraduate students that semester, had spent the term rushing about: he was active with committees, group projects, team activities, studying, and extra-curricular organizations. His commitments and activities had reached a crescendo by the last week of classes. He and most other students were constantly on the go, unable to say “no”

to requests from friends and peers, yet all the while worried about getting good grades and completing final papers. These students were compulsive list makers and exceedingly optimistic about their own abilities to handle new activities. It was not uncommon for them to be involved in school activities for 50 or 60 hours a week.

Adam was usually a confident, articulate, warm, and energetic student. But that afternoon, he had what he considered to be an insurmountable problem. After beating about the bush for a few moments, he came out with his real difficulty. It turned out that he was being told by his father that when he, Adam, graduated after the next semester,

he must go on to get a master’s degree. Adam’s father owns a very successful business and it was his objective that Adam eventually take over the company. But, before his son would be permitted to run the organization, he would have to obtain another degree to justify a vice presidency.

Adam didn’t want to go to graduate school, and he wasn’t sure if he wanted to run his father’s business. Besides, regarding graduate school, Adam recognized that his grade-point average

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was relatively low and might pose a problem in getting accepted into a good program.

Adam—like so many others—had not taken time during his four years of college to reflect on who he was, what he wanted in life, and why.

In the end, Adam improved his grade-point average and applied to graduate school. But his case left me with a lingering concern about the push and pull—the rush—of our educational system.

A Deep-Rooted Problem

It is my fear that the system is contributing to a societal addiction—the addiction to work for the sake of activity. Most of my students spend their waking hours working, studying, and attending classes. Many of them allow little time for vacation and recreation.

They come, in many instances, from very successful families where the pace of life and the focus on work contributes to a set of expectations about what one does with his or her life and the value and virtue of work.

As a result of my observations, I worry that we, as hospitality educators, contribute to, if not actually create, our students' addictions to work, to busyness, and to achievement. Since hard work is viewed as a virtue in American society, and the work ethic is rooted in its Judeo-Christian heritage, we consciously or otherwise promote a point of view that says being on the go and constantly occupied is better than sitting still, listening to the self, and taking time out.

Watching my hardworking students has caused me to stop and think about the importance of reflection and self

awareness. I have recently attempted to integrate reflection and self-renewal into the classroom, so that students can stop and distance themselves from the competition that is fostered in the classroom. I have begun to emphasize exercises that focus on drawing life maps, asking and answering questions about what one wants to do in life and why, and questioning the unquestionable assumptions about work, success, and life.¹

Self-Reflection in the Classroom

I use a four-step exercise to introduce my students to self reflection and the

¹ For more information on this topic, I recommend: S.R. Covey, *The 7 Habits of Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989); J.M. Kouzes and B.Z. Posner, *The Leadership Challenge* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1987); and P. Vaill, *Managing as a Performing Art: New Ideas for a World of Chaotic Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1987).

development of personal "visions." A vision is defined as an ideal image of the future. It serves as a personal compass or game plan, but is not necessarily career-centered. It is simply a way to imagine the future.

Step 1: Life lines. The first step in the exercise is to create a graph of life experiences, called a "lifeline." The premise of this first step is to encourage students to examine their own life experiences, their history of successes, and their personal values. The primary objective is to see that an individual's past is often a prologue to her or his future.

Students are given a blank piece of paper and instructed to draw their lifelines as a graph, using peaks to represent the "highs" in their lives and valleys to show the "lows," starting as far back as they can remember and stopping at the present.

After the students draw their lifelines, they are asked to jot down a word or two that identify both the "peak" experiences and the valleys.

The final part of this step is to analyze the themes and patterns that are revealed by the peaks and valleys. What do these patterns tell the students about their lives, their strengths, and their futures? Interesting patterns of experiences often emerge that help the students to think about what they find compelling, and about their strengths and weaknesses in relationships. For example, one student discovered that all the peak periods in his life were a result of individual accomplishments and all the valleys were associated with working in teams or cooperating with other individuals.

Step 2: Lists. The second step of the exercise involves having the students make lists of all the things they want to accomplish, experience, and achieve. The purpose of this step is to help clarify a central focal point for what matters most to them. The students are asked to jot down all the things they want to do and then to go back over the list and answer the question, "Why do I want this?" They are told that the most important part of this step is coming up with an exhaustive list of answers to the question "why," and are instructed to go

over their list again and again to develop a list of answers.

What the students typically discover during this step is that the first few explanations they jotted down as to why they want to achieve specific activities are, in fact, driven by other motivations. Most often they want to accomplish certain things because their parents expect it or because they think those things are important for success in life. It's only later, when they start to explore the "why" question in greater detail, that they begin to identify personal reasons for heading in certain directions.

After students have created their lists and exhausted their responses to the question "why," they are asked to look over their lists one more time and pretend they have only 18 months to live. They are then asked to reassess their lists and determine whether the lists would be the same or different. This activity is a way of giving perspective to long-term and short-term priorities. It's also a way to differentiate among the critical and desirable experiences that one wishes out of life. This step allows students to think about the most important issues in their lives.

Step 3: Vision statements. The third step in the exercise is one of the most difficult. This step, which may be completed outside the classroom, requires that each student write a 25-words-or-fewer "vision statement." The students are asked to create an ideal image of the future for themselves and to compose a very brief vision statement that describes that future. Next, they are asked to capture the essence of their vision in an even shorter phrase.

One of the objectives of this step is to provide a focal point—a personal ethos—for individual planning. Another objective is to have students think about their *own* vision versus the vision which they may have inherited from others (e.g., parents, peers, role models).

This step focuses on personal reflection and on the identification of a personal vision that is unique for each student. It's too easy for career-minded students to think only in terms of someone else's vision or an organization's goals rather than their own.

While the purpose of step three is to help students integrate their professional goals with their personal image of the future, students have remarked that this step actually facilitates their ability to implement an organization's mission and goals. By taking time to determine their own direction, they are often better able to accomplish the direction and objectives of an organization.

Step 4: Visualization. The final step in this exercise allows the students to imagine themselves living their own vision of being a leader, decision maker, spouse or partner, and parent. In this step, students are asked to practice, mentally, the skills and attitudes that are required to achieve their visions. Using a concept known as mental imagery—which is similar to the technique that deals with mentally practicing the techniques needed to be an effective tennis player or golfer—they are told to visualize themselves as having attained their vision (i.e., ideal future). This approach allows the students to practice or mentally rehearse behaviors and attitudes necessary to accomplish their personal visions. Students are reminded that this is not a substitute for action but a way to help them focus on the vision to which they aspire.

Practice for the future

It is hoped that this exercise is only a beginning point for the students. I tell them that these four steps to creating a vision of the future may have even greater usefulness as they advance in their careers and family lives, and as decisions about their goals and lifestyles evolve and change over time.

It is my objective to show the students how to take a few moments for self reflection and renewal while they ready themselves for their professions. It is my hope and expectation that these steps will be practiced again and again as they advance in their careers, and as they form partnerships with others.

I encourage other educators to take time in their own busy lives and from their hectic schedules to consider the work model they may be creating in the classroom. Perhaps then you, too, will consider including time in your course for moments of reflection. □