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AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF BECOMING: COMMUNITY, MENTORSHIP, AND PARTNERSHIP AS A MEANS FOR SELF-REALIZATION

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My relationship with myself as a learner has been complex my entire life. Through my educational career, I have transformed from a quiet, passive student into one who sees the value and impact of my voice in my own and others' education. My work as a student consultant within the Students as Learners and Teachers program has helped me claim the abilities I've built as student as my own successes and trust that they hold inherent validity.

The Early Years: Becoming a “Good” Student

When I began formal schooling at five years old, I was terrified of ever being perceived as wrong or stupid. This fear limited me so much that I barely spoke, and my parents and teachers decided it was best for me to try Kindergarten again. In my second Kindergarten year, with experience this time, I was much more confident knowing exactly what was expected of me and precisely how to succeed as a student. With this foundation, I slowly became a bolder student throughout elementary, middle, and even high school. I became more talkative, and noticed that I was good at school. This identity I had realized I possessed – that of a “good” student – helped me become more confident in my own abilities as a learner. By the time I was in high school, I felt free to share my thoughts in class, as long as I knew I would be right.

The Transition to College: From “Good” to Engaged Student

As a senior in high school, I applied early decision to Haverford College. I liked the school because it was close to home, small, and somewhat familiar, because my dad was a Haverford alumnus. Still in part that nervous student I was in Kindergarten, all of these features of Haverford greatly appealed to me. I was relieved when I found out I had gotten in, but began to wonder what shape my identity would take at such an elite college. I joked that I would go from the top of the class to the bottom, but in reality, I was worried that my own achievements and abilities wouldn't compare to those of my classmates at Haverford.

Convinced of this as a first-year, I restricted the classes I took to intro level courses that would fulfill my distribution requirements. I wasn't inspired by learning in the same way I had been in my K-12 schooling, and I worried that this passion was limited to success rather than an appreciation of the discovery of learning. As a sophomore, I declared my Linguistics major and Education minor, beginning to pursue what excited me. The Education Program and the courses I took there served as a site for reflection on my own educational experiences. There, I began to reconsider the ways I had and hadn't engaged with my own education, and eventually decided I wanted to teach.

Having made this decision, I once again became reinvested in my education. I spent the summer before my senior year teaching middle schoolers in Philadelphia. Not only did this experience

reaffirm my drive to teach, but it also made it clear the amount of learning about teaching I still needed to do. I saw this need to learn not as a deficit within myself, but an opportunity to be a more effective educator and resource for young people. This desire to grow and improve myself as a teacher (and in ways I didn't know then, as a learner) is what led me to Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT).

The Call to Learn and Teach Together

When I began my first partnership as a student consultant, I was unsure of how my opinions and advice would be valuable in a pedagogical space because I had limited pedagogical experiences, especially at a collegiate level. As student consultants, the only “training” we received was a group orientation and a set of guidelines, which were thorough but not written as mandates for a successful partnership. Where explicit instructions for how to proceed were limited, mentorship and community instead created a text from which I could learn and improve my practices as a partner. This space that valued an authentic development into one’s own style of partnership became one where I was less afraid of missing a standard I had been accustomed to meeting. The standards set there were ones of humanity rather than achievement. They included care, tact, respect, trust, and advocacy. These standards were important for the effectiveness of the work student consultants, faculty members, and individual partnerships did, but were also necessary to create the relationships that this work is done through.

This human, relational standard reframed the way I thought of myself as a learner, and additionally, allowed me to see myself in other roles I hadn't before. Firstly, it helped me see my professors as more human. I experienced this shift by listening to and exchanging with my faculty partner, who I witnessed dealing with human challenges in the role of a teacher. This helped break down an image I had up to that point had of teachers as all-knowing, likely reasonable authorities. It allowed me to think critically about what professors asked of students, realizing that they may not have defensible explanations. This humanization of the role of professor then allowed me to trust and value myself and my opinions more in classroom spaces. It made me a more active learner, because while I once might have accepted what was said blindly, my experience as a student consultant naturally made me consider where these ideas were coming from, what they really meant, and what validity they might or might not hold.

This developing appreciation for the humanity of learning allowed me to understand the roles beyond learner that I held as a student. With more engagement in my own education and that of others, I began to appreciate the art of teaching more. I had previously understood that the choices and policies my teachers made affected me, but I hadn't seen the ways that they could radically challenge norms to be more equitable and accessible for students, creating an authentic learning environment. This led to a deeper appreciation of the content I was studying and the ways it was being taught and learned.

From Following to Flourishing as a Teacher and Lifelong Learner

I plan on teaching in the future, and this appreciation for education as an entity has further developed my interest, investment, and excitement for teaching and learning. My first faculty

partner was in the natural sciences, an area I had had no previous interaction with at Haverford. Working with him, advocating for his students, and supporting his growth in his department created an investment in an entity I had never expected to be involved in. This proved to me the ways that education needs to be humanistic regardless of subject in order to flourish. This interdisciplinary care and energy has the potential to increase the effectiveness of entire schools. I cared about my partner's discipline not because I cared particularly about its focus of study, but because others did and they deserved to teach and learn while becoming more human through the process.

As I accumulated these roles through my own work, I was shedding the self-doubt, competitive nature, and desire for an untenable perfection in my own life, in academic, professional, and personal spaces. Only recently have I realized that I am improving myself through this process not despite a well-established standard of how to do this work, but in large part because of it. Had I been able to follow the example of someone else, I wouldn't have had to trust myself, question my expectations, and take risks in the work I was doing. This knowing was exactly what I had previously relied on in school. In my second Kindergarten year, I blossomed with past experience to reassure and prepare me. As a five year old, I wasn't ready to navigate learning and social interactions without explicit instructions or expectations. Now, as a college senior, I have learned how humanistic advocacy for others has contributed to an advocacy for myself. Through community, partnership, and mentorship, I've received the support I need to do this safely and bravely, becoming the teacher and learner I've learned that I can be.