

The Not-So-Unbeaten Path

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April 16, 2012

By 11:30 a.m., I had finally reached my Spring Break destination: New Orleans. Smiling local faces and a warm whispering breeze welcomed me into the French Quarter as the subtle scent of salt from the nearby brackish waters settled lightly on my skin. I wandered down St. Louis Street with my three best girlfriends by my side, each intoxicated by the lunchtime aromas of fried seafood and freshly baked French bread. My thoughts, however, were roaming elsewhere.

Without hesitation, we stopped at Johnny's Po-Boys for our first official "N'awlins" meal, along with at least 50 other starving tourists in search for the best fried shrimp po-boy sandwich in town. After shoving our way through the disgruntled line that filled a room no larger than a storage closet, the four of us discovered a vacant red and white-checkered picnic table in the back room of the restaurant and prepared for our much-deserved meal. For the first time since my travels began at 6 a.m., I inhaled deeply, allowing a wave of relaxation to wash over me as I settled into my new home for the next five days.

Just as my sandwich grazed my lips, my Blackberry chirped loudly with a new email notification. "Ugh, what now?" I mumbled, annoyed at the disruption, as I placed my sandwich back on its flimsy paper plate and reached for my phone. I opened the message titled "Your Communication, Culture and Technology (CCT) Application," and began to read: "Dear Alena, Congratulations! After extensive review of your application, the CCT

program's admissions committee has recommended to the Dean of the Graduate School that you be accepted..."

Noticing a sudden change in my facial expression, my friends asked, "What is it, Alena?" almost in unison. "I...I got into Georgetown," was all I could manage to stutter before bursting into tears of pure relief. My friends watched with proud tears in their eyes as I dialed my parents and left a barely audible message about my first graduate school acceptance through joyful sobs.

Every senior student at UNC-Chapel Hill is counting down the days until graduation, 39 as of today. Whether excited or depressed, we all acknowledge the inevitable. The majority of these soon-to-be graduates are foraging through the struggling job market, a fair number without success. I, on the other hand, am opting for an alternative approach. Despite the skepticism of my professors and peers, I am attending graduate school. By earning a master's of arts degree, I will emerge two years from today with expanded credentials and—hopefully—improved chances of long-term employment.

Rewinding six months to when I officially selected the graduate programs to which I wanted to apply, I reached out to previous professors and employers for letters of recommendation. While each contact was more than willing to endorse me, they exuded an air of uncertainty that was impossible to overlook as I described my chosen postgraduate path.

Select professors in UNC-CH's School of Journalism and Mass Communication, for example, remained strong believers in accumulating work experience immediately following graduation and failed to acknowledge any substantial benefits of achieving a master's degree in this stage of my life. One professor even advised students to remove

their grade point averages from their resumes altogether due to their minimal influence on an employer's ultimate hiring decision. This suggestion left me feeling nothing but angry and resentful, communicated in much more explicit words at the time, toward the faculty whose job it was to encourage me along my successful career path. I had worked far too hard throughout my time at UNC-CH to downplay my academic achievements; simply put, this suggestion was one I refused to swallow.

My environmental sustainability capstone advisor expressed unique concerns with my postgraduate goals. Her experience with graduate school admissions trends revealed that the majority of accepted students returned to their studies after years of research and work experience as opposed to enrolling immediately following their graduation from an undergraduate program. With a genuine sense of empathy in her eyes and voice, she feared the havoc that six potential rejection letters could reap on my high-achieving attitude and self-esteem.

Despite the lack of optimism and encouragement from my professors, I continued to pursue my dream. With the moral support of my family and closest friends, I pushed through countless hours of essay writing, suffocating waves of anxiety and self-doubt, and hot tears of frustration and exhaustion. I would be lying if I said I maintained a strong intuition about my future acceptances throughout these few months. Persevering through a blinding haze, I simply hoped and prayed that all of my work would ultimately pay off.

Fast forwarding three months, the deed was done. Six tedious applications, one unnerving Graduation Record Examination, and a sobering \$700 in fees later, I officially finished applying to graduate schools. All that remained was the waiting game, the easy part, right? Wrong. A naturally impatient person, I could barely manage to wait for the

consistently late campus commuter bus, let alone sit idly by and watch my closest friends with intimidatingly impressive qualifications struggle to solidify their professional plans following graduation. However, my genuine panic that I may ultimately join them, three months behind the curve, if no large envelopes or enthusiastic phone calls made it my way outweighed these sympathetic tendencies. The accumulation of my nerves rested heavily on my shoulders, and I had no idea when—or if— the weight would be magically lifted.

March 5 marked the day that all of these anxieties began to disappear. Sitting in Johnny's Po-Boys with mascara running down my cheeks, I smiled brightly with the most self-assurance I had felt in years. My remaining four acceptances arrived within a matter of weeks, transforming the waiting game into airplane boarding lines as I visited each of my program options in Washington, D.C. and New York City.

My conversations with admissions board members during these trips quickly contradicted any skepticism or concern previously expressed by my undergraduate professors. At Georgetown University, for example, the average graduate student age has decreased from 27 to 23 within just a couple of years. Undergraduate senior students comprise at least 60 percent of their recently admitted class for the upcoming fall. The struggling economy, increasing competition throughout various industries, and promotion of specialization are all changing the way graduate programs cater to their students and the marketplace they plan to enter within the next few years. Realizing the prominence of my postgraduate plan, I watched my remaining hesitations fade away and, in its place, self-confidence in my ability to join this group of high achievers successfully begin to blossom.

On Easter Sunday, the process will be complete. Signing on the dotted line and forking over yet another deposit, I will commit the next few years of my life to a graduate

program that will guide the rest of my future career. My nerves have been wholly replaced by lists of pros and cons for each program option, excitedly awaiting my ultimate decision.

As spring semester's finals come and go, along with sighs of relief from senior students in Carroll Hall, thoughts of my final days as a Tar Heel take center stage. I settle into my favorite library chair among my classmates, each senior anxious as the next to wave goodbye in their Carolina blue cap and gown and begin their budding career. While my peers itch to escape from the classroom and join the job market battlefield, I feel content in this library chair, contemplating the academic years awaiting me.

As I complete my final semester at UNC-CH, I will sing the anthem loudly as a proud Tar Heel, wave my graduation cap goodbye to this beautiful campus, and jump full force into the educational endeavor that lies ahead. It's time for a change of scenery, a new challenge to overcome. It's time to discover my new favorite library chair.