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Listening to Students

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FINDING MY VOICE

in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

BY MEGAN M. OTIS

It was my second year at Western Washington University (WWU) and my first introduction to what would become the most significant experience of my college career. Carmen Werder, the director of the Teaching-Learning Academy (TLA) and my advisor and professor, offered me a job working for her program. The TLA, as I came to learn, is an initiative to promote the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) at WWU—a forum for studying and enhancing the learning culture at Western through dialogue and collective action among students, faculty, staff, administrators, and community members. TLA resulted from Western’s participation in the Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (CASTL).

Bringing student voices into SoTL has been a signature element of Western’s related work since 1999. Each year, TLA participants decide on a SoTL research question that is important to them. Then they meet in small groups to talk about the question, research the issue together, and plan action to create positive change for everyone on campus. The year I began in TLA, the university was in the midst of revisiting our general university requirements (GURs). Since this institutional initiative was on everyone’s mind, the TLA chose this two-part question: What is the purpose of a liberal arts education, and how might Western restructure its general education requirements to honor that purpose?

I confess, at that time I didn’t even know what a “liberal arts education” was or that I was getting one. But I was navigating my GURs, which I was finding exceedingly difficult. I felt there were too many requirements, and I didn’t have the

slightest idea why I was being required to take all of those classes. I wasn’t invested in them at all; I just did what was needed to get an A, even if my learning didn’t last past the final exam.

Then one day in TLA, I was sitting in a small group talking about the research question when the then-director of academic advising posed this question to the students: “If I could give you your degree right now, would you take it and go?”

At first, all of the students answered with an enthusiastic “yes.” Imagine skipping all of those classes we felt forced to take! We’d get to go straight into the job we wanted, the job that we needed that degree for. But the more we talked about it, we students started to feel uneasy about that answer. I imagined applying for a job with my “degree” and not having any of the knowledge or skills that having that degree supposedly signified. It would be a completely worthless piece of paper.

After I and the other students came to this realization, we started to list what knowledge and skills we thought every college graduate needed to have, and then we compared our list to the current GURs. We were shocked. Our list actually had *more* requirements on it than the university’s! Suddenly, we started to reevaluate our previous belief; maybe there weren’t *too many* general education requirements. We finally started to understand why we were required to take all of those classes.

One of the observations on *our* list was that college graduates needed an understanding of diversity in order to operate in a global society. We were delighted when we realized that the university believed this was important too; students were required to take a comparative gender and multicultural studies (CGM) course. Then the university’s general education task force put out two proposals, and one of the proposals recommended the removal of the CGM requirement.

The students in TLA were indignant. How can they remove that requirement? Do they really want to send college

graduates out into the world without any knowledge of how to work with people different from themselves? We wanted to do something, but what could we do?

TLA participants developed several “white papers” explaining our collective position with regard to the proposals. We let the task force know what changes we supported, as well as the ones we disapproved of, and why. Then the University Board of Trustees invited some TLA representatives to share our views on the proposals. Carmen, another student, and I attended the meeting. I stood up and spoke in front of the Board of Trustees and expressed my hope that WWU would not remove the CGM requirement.

I had no way of knowing how influential our words were going to be—but in the final recommendations the task force cited the TLA white papers multiple times, and Western kept the CGM requirement.

Within the TLA, we all—but the students especially—were astonished that we had more power than we thought. We had made a positive difference within our university. Through TLA, I learned from firsthand experience that I did not have to passively accept whatever was happening to me in my college education. I learned that my voice was powerful; I could use it and be heard, especially when it was joined with other voices.

I also learned what a liberal arts education was all about through listening to the perspectives of faculty, staff, and fellow students in the TLA dialogues, and *that* understanding profoundly changed my approach to my education. It gave me a wider and more holistic perspective. I was no longer going to college because I needed a degree to get a job. I was going to college to learn, to discover the breadth and depth of knowledge, to gain the skills necessary to be a contributing citizen of this country and this world.

Finding my voice in TLA’s SoTL work also helped me find my agency as a learner, and that experience has had a lasting impact on me. ☐

Megan M. Otis is a graduate student in cultural anthropology at Western Washington University and a co-editor of and contributing author for the book *Engaging Student Voices in the Study of Teaching and Learning* (Stylus Publishing, 2010).