From My Perspective...

No Single Path, But Persistence and Guidance Can Get You There

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When I was working on my undergraduate degree, if some­one had told me I could be a pro­fessor one day, I’d have laughed and told them they 100% had the wrong person. It wasn’t that I didn’t think I was smart or will­ing to work hard, but to me that kind of achievement seemed so unattainable. I had only begun to start thinking about the possibility of graduate school in my 4th year through the support of my undergraduate thesis supervisor (and because everyone else in my Honours Thesis class was!).

Around the same time, I had also begun a place­ment (or internship) at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in Toronto, which really set me on the path to where I am today. As part of this placement, I was given the opportunity to sit in on treatment groups for men who had committed sexual offenses. I was ini­tially shocked hearing details about the offenses they had committed, but as I got to know them, it became increasingly easier to see past the offenses to the per­son. For example, I started to care about how their job interviews had gone. The realization that these men were so much more than their offenses solidified for me the importance of treatment, not just for prevent­ing future crimes and sparing more victims, but also for ensuring a future for the men who had committed the offenses.

As a result of being involved in this treatment group, I was offered a volunteer research assistant position (which eventually evolved into a paid posi­tion). I read and coded hundreds of treatment files of men who had committed sexual offenses. The tre­mendous range of experiences and factors that con­tributed to their offenses was fascinating to me. That opportunity really ignited in me a passion for research that ultimately resulted in pursuing a MA in counsel­ling psychology from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (which also included another opportunity for a practicum work­ing in treatment groups with the Correctional Service of Canada), and PhD in forensic psychology from the University of Birmingham in the United Kingdom, examining important factors in the effectiveness of treatment for men who had committed sexual offenses. For example, I found that denying one’s offense was related to lower levels of reoffending instead of higher as is commonly assumed.

However, I don’t want to suggest that this path was straight and easy, or clear cut. When I discovered how much I enjoyed treatment, I thought the next logical step was to apply to clinical psychology pro­grams. I did loads of research into clinical psychol­ogy programs and potential supervisors throughout Canada and the United States; I worked tirelessly on my statements of intent; I studied and wrote my GREs; and I submitted my applications. Unfortunately, after all that, I didn’t get in to any of them! Looking back, I know now that this was not surprising because clinical programs have limited openings and are noto­riously difficult to get into. Although I had pretty much decided my career was over before it had even started, I sought guidance and support from my supervisors and mentors. They helped me see how many other options there were out there, including counselling psychology and pursuing research degrees on clinical psychology related topics. Their guidance, along with their continuous support and encouragement, helped me persevere until I found programs that were the right fit for my interests.

So, seek and accept support and guidance where it is offered. It can help you see your way through doors you hadn’t noticed before. Also, try to take advantage of opportunities that come your way. Throughout my PhD, I tried my best to take every opportunity that my supervisor offered, even if it wasn’t directly related to my PhD. These opportunities took me off in a variety of different directions, including travelling around to pris­ons all across the United Kingdom with a theatre group called Geese Theatre Company that uses interactive the­atre and facilitates drama-based group work in criminal justice settings, to evaluate some of Geese’s programs. I also did an evaluation for the Ministry of Justice in the United Kingdom that eventually led to me being invited to give training and presentations in Finland and Sweden on the Good Lives Model of Offender Rehabilitation (i.e., a strengths-based rehabilitation framework). As much as you have to be pro-active about carving your path, also remain open to opportunities. You never know what unexpected and wonderful direc­tions they may take you and how or where new passions and ideas might be sparked.

*Dr. Harkins is an Associate Professor in forensic psychol­ogy at University of Ontario Institute of Technology. She enjoys biking, playing volleyball, music festivals, vegan cooking, and being bossed around by a small ginger wiener dog.*