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It is better to be like Garry

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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph:

When I was a much younger person, I had grandiose plans for myself. In the final weeks of my high school career, I participated in a scholarship competition. Members of the selection committee peppered me and a few of my classmates with questions about our future plans. After an hour of perfunctory and banal back and forth about college selection and potential courses of study, a member of the committee said, "We are having a very difficult time deciding which finalist is most deserving of the award." The committee then asked each of us to provide a one-word response that encapsulated why we deserved the money. With no hesitation, I told them that I deserved the scholarship because I was ambitious. I won the award and it helped finance my first year of higher education.



Dr. Wes Renfro

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This is a seemingly trivial except that it is not. Growing up in a distinctly working class environment where money was a perennial issue, this scholarship was critical. Without it, I am unsure if I could have afforded to attend college. As I pursued my undergraduate degree and thought about my future self, I was certain that I would become a person of consequence. That is, I was sure that I would leave college and embark on a career that would make me acclaimed and upwardly mobile. As graduation drew closer, I began to apply to graduate programs in policy

studies. I ended up at the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs (GSPIA) at the University of Pittsburgh.

GSPIA is one of the best programs of its kind in the country and it has produced many successful alumni. The program has a remarkable success rate in placing its graduates in important positions in public affairs, like the Central Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency, and the State Department. Some alumni are well-known and highly regarded public figures who have exercised considerable sway over public policy. Others have found great acclaim and wealth in private industry, often working as consultants and lobbyists.

Although I was not fully aware of it at the time, I spent the first 22 years of my life in a poor and comparatively underdeveloped part of the country. Few of my high school classmates attended any institutions of higher education and even less obtained a baccalaureate degree. Before going to college, I knew only a handful of adults who had even take a college course, much less earned a degree. After matriculating to GSPIA, I was certain that I was on a different trajectory and that I would become a Pitt alumnus of consequence.

GSPIA is a school that feeds individuals into public service and private enterprise. Agencies and employers would routinely come to campus and recruit. It was common for students to have jobs, often impressive ones, waiting for them as soon as they graduated. After just two months in the program, I was interviewing for an analyst position with the Department of Defense. The position offered a very competitive salary in Washington, DC. I was certain that this was the first step in what would be a quick rise into a position of great influence. My parents were thrilled and I took considerable pride in telling classmates and friends that as soon as I finished my graduate degree I would be an analyst for the Department of Defense -- at just 24 years old.

I soon began to have doubts about this trajectory, however. Although I had always wanted to become a well-known policymaker, I also wanted to teach. My undergraduate experience had been transformative and I was not sure that I would be able to give up an academic environment, even in exchange for the policy career that I thought I wanted. I soon

began researching transferring to a different kind of graduate program. For the first time, I began to think about PhD programs and becoming a professor. Mostly stumbling through the process, I only applied to one program -- the University of Connecticut. I applied there because an undergraduate professor had attended their program. I, somewhat naively, assumed that his placement at my sleepy undergraduate institution in rural Ohio meant that the University of Connecticut was an elite program.

I quickly learned that the program was good but certainly not elite. It was, as one professor at GSPIA told me, the Toyota Corolla of PhD programs in political science. Attending the program was by no means a poor choice but it was certainly not going to place me on a path that was likely to end in much acclaim or name recognition. I decided that I needed to visit the campus and the program in order to get a better sense of its cultures. Unable to afford a flight, I drove from Pittsburgh to Storrs, Connecticut and spent a day and a half on campus. I met with students, faculty, and staff. I spent most of my time with John Garry Clifford, the program's Director of Graduate Studies. Known universally by his middle name, Garry was a diplomatic historian by training. In a twist of fate that is all but impossible in higher education today, Garry ended up in a political science department and not a history department. By the time I met him, he was in his 60s and had been the Director of Graduate Studies for at least two decades.

He took me on a tour in his aged Lincoln Town Car. The vehicle, as I later learned, was the object of endless fascination among graduate students and faculty at the University of Connecticut. No one, it seemed, was certain why Garry kept his ancient ride. It was easily as old as I was and seemed to be held together with duct tape and bondo. It was odd but charming. Garry was very honest with me about the program. Nearly of all its graduates were placed in tenure-track positions within one year of graduation -- the academic equivalent of finding a leprechaun riding a unicorn down Main Street. The caveat, however, was that almost of these positions were in teaching oriented colleges, like my *alma mater*. Garry, who studied at Williams College as an undergraduate, thought this was perfectly fine placement record. He suggested that if I took the program seriously, I would probably end up with what he considered a decent

academic appointment but studying at the University of Connecticut was unlikely to set me on a path towards what most in higher education consider a prestige job, i.e., an appointment at a nationally known research university like Harvard or MIT.

Transferring from Pitt and declining the job offer at the Department of Defense in favor of a graduate program that was likely to land me a position at a liberal arts college was an important decision. While still unsure about many things in higher education, I correctly understood that if I made the switch it would be very difficult to return to the policy community. I elected to transfer. After an additional six years of study, I faced the notoriously capricious academic job market. By this time, I knew Garry well and was happy to call him a friend. He was unfailingly supportive of me and countless other graduate students. He helped make sure I had the resources I need to be successful. We spent many hours in his office as we worked through several tutorials that I took in diplomatic history. Garry was generous with nearly everything he frequently treated graduate students to pizza and beer. A physically large man with a big voice, I can easily recall him heartily laughing at his favorite pizza joint. In hindsight, these moments were some of the most important parts of my graduate career.

As Garry predicted when we first met, I met with some success with liberal arts colleges. I accepted a position with at college in Massachusetts and eventually with St. John Fisher College. I have been at Fisher for almost five years and love my job. Nonetheless, sometimes I think about what my life would have been like had I opted to stay at GSPIA and take the job at the Department of Defense. Sometimes I wonder if I would have become a well-known or powerful policymaker of a highly compensated consultant or lobbyist. After all, those positions would be far more likely to impress than being a professor of political science at a liberal arts college in Rochester, New York.

In March 2014, Garry dropped dead of a heart attack outside the Homer Babbage library at the University of Connecticut. In a most Garry-esque fashion, his arms were full of books. He had been a faculty member at UConn for over 40 years. This unexpected tragedy provoked a great outpouring of sympathy from friends, colleagues, and students. Since Garry's death, I find

myself thinking of him often. These are universally happy occurrences because thinking of Garry always makes me smile.

Garry was a reputable scholar, an excellent administrator, and a wonderful teacher. He was not famous. Even within his discipline, he was not the most prolific, the most cited, or the most influential. His name does not have the cache of Doris Kearns Goodwin or even a John Lewis Gaddis. Despite his near encyclopedic knowledge of the history of American foreign relations, he was never invited to advise policymakers or to be a talking head on television or radio. He was not famous or widely acclaimed but he was esteemed by all who knew him. As I think about his life, and my own, I am increasingly confident in the choices I made. I am unlikely to be famous, powerful, or wealthy. If I am lucky, however, I might be fortunate enough to be held in high esteem by colleagues and students. I think my 18-year-old self would have been disappointed with my current self. Thankfully, I am no longer my 18-year-old self. If my life and legacy is anything like Garry's, I will have led a life of purpose and distinction that is far more important than fame.

