

BEYOND THE DEGREE CHECKLIST

What's the real point of college?

By Cynthia Demetriou

NATASHA'S EYES buzz with intensity and focus. She talks at breakneck speed, directing questions with such urgency that an advisor might momentarily feel like a defendant under the inquisition of a determined prosecutor rather than an educator in the presence of a bright, young college student. For me, conversations with Natasha are often a verbal ping-pong match requiring the utmost attention, but since she speaks with such passion for her education and for success, I don't find these conversations arduous. As an advisor, I have respect for her as a student and concern for her as an individual. While her passion for education is unparalleled, so is her anxiety about her academic decisions.

Natasha is a nursing student with a 4.0 grade point average, a first-generation East Indian American, and the first woman in her family to go to college. Lugging a twenty-five-pound book bag of texts that cause her slight frame to slump forward under the weight, she carries a far heavier burden of familial expectation and pride. She has expressed fears of wasting her family's hard-earned money if she is unsuccessful in school or if she makes the wrong academic decisions. Her fear is most acute during registration, when she frets exhaustingly over course

selection. In many ways, her thorough attention to detail is an asset to Natasha as a student, but I fear that rigidity may hinder her ability to adapt to new and unfamiliar situations.

Natasha's challenges are shared by students on college campuses across the country. She represents many of today's students and their families, who see college course selection as the checking off of items on a to-do list. These students often feel pressure to take only required courses in order to graduate within four years and minimize tuition costs. According to the findings of a study recently conducted by Melissa Sandfort and Jennifer Hawthorn, high school students' primary motivation for attending college is career

preparation, and they feel substantial pressure from their parents when choosing where and what to study. The "helicopter parent" moniker used in a 2005 Associated Press article by Justin Pope is a description of today's aggressively involved parents that is all too familiar to college educators. Helicopter parents hover over their children as they make choices, whether serious or mundane, about their college career.

IWOULD LIKE for Natasha to take a course outside of her major requirements as an interesting and creative break from her required nursing courses. But for Natasha, taking a nonrequired course seems a wasteful or self-indul-

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gent act, for she feels enormous pressure to be careful with the tuition money that her parents have so carefully saved. The challenge that I face with Natasha is a challenge that educators face with the majority of students in college today: showing the value of a liberal arts education and, particularly, conveying how nonrequired courses enhance learning by creating connections between diverse subjects and by encouraging personal growth.

If Natasha can learn to be more flexible—to see how courses other than chemistry and microbiology can advance her career goals—then she has the potential to be a dynamic individual and, eventually, an exceptional nurse capable of excelling in the unexpected and difficult circumstances she is sure to encounter in the medical field. To help Natasha learn to be adaptable in varied situations and to expand her experience beyond her required courses, I strive to provide and promote new learning opportunities. One of my goals is to inspire her—and all students—to see the university not as a technical school that provides a linear path to a specific career but as an opportunity to broaden one’s range of experience and the scope of one’s academic, personal, and social interests.

While keeping a goal-oriented student advancing toward a degree, an advisor needs to value general education requirements and recommend courses beyond those required for successful completion of the degree. For students narrowly focused on a career or acutely mindful of using tuition money wisely, it is helpful to discuss the interdisciplinary nature of learning as well as the real-world applications of cross-departmental studies—for example, the uses of theater-based training in the business world or the critical role that precise communication plays in the health professions. For Natasha, I suggested the course *Healing and the Arts*, which is in

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the Nursing Department but examines nontraditional forms of treatment, including art therapy. Natasha was initially reluctant to take the course, but she ultimately appreciated the experience so much that she decided to take another elective involving the arts the following semester. The class she chose was *Modern Dance*. At our last meeting, Natasha remarked that the class is one of her favorites and that she especially enjoys sharing Indian dance movements with her classmates.

When she does relax, Natasha is quite a fun person to be around. She becomes animated when speaking of typical behaviors of the new American friends she has made on campus and as she describes how different they are from the young women in her primarily Indian

neighborhood in Brooklyn. Natasha beams as she describes teaching traditional Indian dance to elementary school girls at a dance school near her home. When she speaks of these experiences, I imagine her in the future, taking genuine interest in her patients as individuals while offering boundless warmth and support to those in need. The experience Natasha is gaining through dance and nonrequired courses provides her with skills in creative thinking, improvisation, and communication that she may not gain through her required courses. These opportunities have the potential to help Natasha become a well-rounded person as well as a more sensitive and perceptive nurse who is capable of responding to the needs of her patients.

TO HELP NATASHA get from where she is today to realizing her dream of nursing, my greatest challenge is to help her build the confidence she needs to make academic decisions based on her own interests and goals rather than solely on a degree requirement checklist. Many students look at general education requirements as something they have to get through. When discussing general education course selection and other academic decisions, I like to ask my advisees what they would like to learn from a particular course or experience, in an attempt to help redirect and broaden their thinking. In my relationship with Natasha, I strive to encourage her intellectual and personal growth by being calming and reassuring yet sufficiently provoking and challenging. This complex balance, familiar to most edu-

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cators, is made even more complicated by forces from outside the student–advisor relationship. As many of today’s students negotiate high parental expectations and strong societal pressure, advisors are challenged to work with indecisive or fearful students who are reluctant to enroll in courses outside their academic major or who are so career–driven that they may not initially appreciate the benefits of cocurricular experiences or nonrequired courses. Frustration may result when an advisor voices her belief that she sees the best decision for a student while the student sees another choice. In those situations, patience and understanding are essential.

Educators need patience to answer questions from students like Natasha, and we should appreciate their attention to detail and inquisitive nature. Educators should choose to use these questions as opportunities for the student to learn how to research answers independently and to access the institution’s resources. With Natasha, I work to give her accurate information, teach her where to find information in the future, and then encourage her to make her own choices. Finally, I try to reassure and support her.

In my work, I attempt to demonstrate respect for each student’s unique situation, to display cultural understanding and appreciation for each student’s point of view. I hope this sensitivity to students’ experiences and to their particular challenges helps build the kind of productive relationship that will allow me to discuss their expecta-

tions and the value of a liberal arts education. I believe that establishing such a relationship has the potential to add meaning to the undergraduate experience and to better prepare students for life after graduation.

I also believe that the student–educator relationship must operate within appropriate boundaries that ultimately encourage students to draw their own conclusions. I provide Natasha with information and engage her in conversation about her options, but ultimately, the choices are hers. My goal is that by her senior year she will have enough confidence in herself and will relax and trust herself enough to make independent academic decisions, mindful of the benefits of a liberal arts education. I hope this kind of experience will enable her to leave the university equipped with critical thinking and decision-making skills that will contribute to her success beyond graduation.

NOTES

Pope, J. (2005, August 28). Colleges try to deal with hovering parents. Retrieved August 28, 2005, from <http://www.ap.org/>

Sandfort, M. H., & Haworth, J. G. (2002). Whassup? A glimpse into the attitudes and beliefs of the millennial generation. *Journal of College and Character*, 2(2). Retrieved July 5, 2005, from <http://www.collegevalues.org/articles.cfm?id=613&a=1>



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