

“Get perfect grades or else,” my mother often said to me. Though this stemmed from a place of love and hope, it terrified me because I already experienced “or else”. Born in the Filipino countryside in a little village, most job prospects ranged from menial labor, the sex industry, or crime. The only alternative would be to get a good education and leave for college or an apprenticeship. As I started Kindergarten, the US military seized the property rights to my elementary school and built a Shell gas station in its place. My former classmates and I had no choice but to work in the fiber factory and textile plant. To save my future, my father joined the same organization that took my school. By the grace of the US military, I got to try again.

Kindergarten consisted of me learning English and acclimating to a new culture while “or else” always loomed over me. I thought about it when I couldn’t understand the material being taught, when my teachers did not hide how little they cared for me when I struggled, when I wanted to take a break, and even as I tried to figure out my different identities. “Or else” trained me to be a perfect student with no personality and no sense of fulfillment. I was prepared to be financially stable but had no idea how to be happy.

It wasn’t until my first year of college that I let myself enjoy my learning. By serendipitous financial aid errors, I decided to attend Evergreen instead of Harvard. But here, I had an opportunity to explore my interests instead of following a prescribed syllabus. I learned that I enjoy writing creative fiction that explores real-world challenges others can also imagine themselves in. I revel in guiding my tutees in their journeys to advanced mathematics. Then to my surprise, I found companionship with others who also discovered the joys of learning as an adult learner. Not only is education a means of establishing a future but a unique opportunity for self-exploration. My children are raised

to explore and wonder about the world they live in. A good education should be a byproduct of curiosity. The only obstacle in their way should be themselves. There shouldn't be an "or else".

Unfortunately, "or else" isn't a long-gone factory in a now-thriving town. It's falling behind the rising cost of living. Get an education or lose in the job market where you compete against specialized training and advanced degrees. As an educator, I can help make the content easier to digest, explain what policies exist, and how to fill out administrative forms. What I can't do in my current position and limited knowledge is effect change. When my students ask why a certain procedure exists or why it's implemented the way it is, "...even though..." is always part of my answer. This late registration form exists to abide by reporting laws in Washington state *even though* this is the type of paperwork that could impede a student's ability to register. A student put on academic leave must petition the Deans for support *even though* administrative support may be a reason they lost credit. My heart sinks as I watch them try to reconcile these conflicting ideas while also realizing their predicament does not apply to everyone.

In these moments, I think of the difference between good and great professors. My most impactful mentors were those who guided me through institutional barriers as an immigrant, as a disabled student – as a student that traditional spaces in academia do not want. But professors and educators shouldn't have to do this. Alternative skills for underserved students to succeed in higher academia equally to their represented classmates should not exist.

I know I need to address these barriers as an administrator, not an educator. I also know my graduate degree in public administration must also come from Evergreen. It was

here that I was taught and constantly reminded not to take the “human” out of “humanities studies”. Education must be accessible for students, not for schools. Teaching should be enriching for faculty as well. This type of learning community Evergreen offers will give me the skills necessary to analyze policies and keep my focus on the people. Different lived experiences, contrasting values, anything and everything I could learn in our MPA program will be used to have “or else” end with us.