

A graduate degree in public administration. Fifteen years ago the thought would never have occurred to me, but here I am today hoping to pursue this new dream of mine. My academic path to this point has been a diverse, and at times wobbly, trek. First pursuing a degree in music performance, then in nursing sciences, and finally in the realm of psychology and communications. Not the most straightforward journey, but my non-traditional approach to an undergraduate degree has afforded me some valuable realizations. First and foremost, the final destination is not the most important aspect of an expedition. Second, change is an inevitability we can learn to be at peace with. Finally, the only learning opportunities we regret are the ones not taken.

There is a commonality in all of the academic and employment fields I have pursued: rules and regulations. Having an appreciation of all things foundational and guiding, I am drawn to the policies that govern any workplace. I had not encountered the opportunity to be a part of creating and interpreting policies until my current position as a Training Specialist at Exceptional Foresters Inc., a nonprofit entity that provides support to adults with developmental disabilities. Initially hired to train curriculum from the Developmental Disabilities Administration to Direct Support Professionals, I quickly found that the issue of compliance was one that few people were aware of, let alone enthusiastic to tackle. So off I went on an adventure of research and implementation of Washington Administrative Codes and policies that would set in place a firm foundation upon which we could build a stable and streamlined training program.

I loved this initial foray into the world of policy. What I hadn't foreseen was the demand this would create in my workplace. "Oh, you love reading and interpreting policy? Can you look into these WACs and tell us if we're missing anything?" I've had my hands full ever since and have appreciated the challenge of increasing and sharing my knowledge of nonprofit administration. As I have settled into my administrative role, I have been able to observe firsthand how setting policy and procedure structures in place helps to create a more cohesive and productive work place. This is particularly important in an

agency that strives to provide the absolute best support and advocacy for an underserved population that has historically been erased and silenced.

There are three reasons I highly value my current position with my employer: having the ability to increase my knowledge and skill set, connecting seemingly unrelated topics to one another to improve relevance and understanding, and helping others access information that benefits them. Each of these areas were emphasized facets of learning in my time spent at The Evergreen State College while completing my Bachelor of Arts degree. I believe I thrived in and benefitted from the format, delivery, and instruction of the classes I enrolled in, and that I received an education that made critical thinking and practical application of knowledge a priority. The instructional time given to seminars, in which all voices could be heard, was particularly remarkable to my learning. It allowed me to experience the benefits of team work and collaboration. Prior to my time at Evergreen I staunchly preferred independent learning to group based projects. Today, I highly value being part of a team and allowing everyone involved in a project to share their ideas and utilize the skills they possess.

Building a community that supports and enriches the lives of a diverse population is of tremendous importance to me. I want to be an asset and valuable resource in this endeavor not only to my employer, but to the individuals I support, their families, and other interested parties as well. I have a genuine desire to work collaboratively with others in my agency, our overseeing state agencies, and similar nonprofit companies to create and maintain systems and protocols that give clear guidance to entities that promote integration for individuals who have historically been excluded. To be a leader in my field requires that I step into areas outside of my comfort zone, set goals that seem unachievable, and engage in skills or knowledge that I currently am not even aware I am not familiar with. These are things that I ask the people I support to do on a daily basis as they learn to advocate for themselves. How better to lead than by example?

Creating space for underrepresented voices has been a focus of mine since I initially attended Evergreen for my undergraduate studies. It has largely guided my work ethic as I strive to change existing practices in the field of direct support. My teaching and training emphasize documenting with individuals, rather than documenting about them. Creating plans and services tailored with those receiving support, rather than tailored for them. Public administration is a field in which leaders learn to represent with, advocate with, and create policies with those who will benefit from the changes being sought. In short – equipping myself with the skills learned in pursuit of an MPA is not about me. It is about building communities, empowering my neighbors and fellow citizens, and encouraging those who are intimidated or exhausted by the process of policy-making to be part of the conversations that bring about positive change.