

## The Final Word: HESA, Pathway to an Authentic Life

Stacey A. Miller

*Now I become myself. It's taken time, many years and places. I have been dissolved and shaken. I have worn other people's faces.* - May Sarton (as cited in Nash, 2004, p. 99)

As a Black woman in the academy I have too often found myself in disguise. Hiding behind a mask constructed around what I believed people wanted me to be, afraid to show my own face. I was afraid because when I looked around through the eyeholes of the mask, I did not see many women like me, and I still don't. I'm brown, loud, big, and beautiful, at times a stark contrast to what is reflected back at me. How could I be myself when covertly and sometimes even overtly, intentional or not, the academy tells me to conform, to fit in?

Yet as time goes by, little by little, I have found myself, my voice, and continue to figure out who I am. Poetically enough, it has been through my engagement with HESA students that I have found my most authentic voice, the Stacey that I've always hoped and wanted to be.

HESA students are a marvel to me. Regardless of their age or what level of experience they bring to the program, they are like a breath of fresh air to a weary professional who constantly teeters between order and chaos, exhilaration and burn out. The naïveté of the first year and the obvious growth in the second makes me proud to be a student affairs professional. Unlike older professionals who seem to be cast in stone, HESA students are like clay: a little dried out from life's experiences, but still moldable; open to knowing and growing. They are smart, bright, curious, scared, and nervous, but above all else, positive. They believe in what they are learning and that they can make a difference in a profession that demands so much, for what at times seems like so little. They are eager to confront injustice and demand equality for all. They are open to all students, and share their life experiences with reckless abandon and truth.

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As a veteran professional of over 15 years, I play an unspoken and obligatory role in their growth and development as young professionals. More often, however, it is they who serve as role models for me. They say what's on their minds, because they have not yet learned to be professionally silent; they question our authority, because they have not yet learned that there might be a consequence to their inquiry; they question policy, because they have not been beaten down by bureaucracy and old hats who say no without thinking. Often, without even knowing it, they are the epitome of authentic, of authenticity. They are genuine in thought, deed, and action. Wrong or right, they are always striving to be better than they were yesterday, and better for tomorrow.

HESA students have made me think and feel deeply about things long forgotten. They keep me in touch with "today's" students and help me understand the language they speak. HESA students have made me laugh and, embarrassingly enough, cry. No doubt I have erupted into fits of anger as a result of something they have done or said. I have even broken what some believe is a cardinal sin, I often curse in their presence. Through it all they listen, respect, challenge, laugh, and encourage the real me, my authentic self. With and without words, they have flatly demanded the real Stacey Miller, uncensored, imperfect, honest, and true. Through their smiles, laughter, and tears, they have asked me to be me, not only because it is right, but because it gives them license to be who they are too. In their quest for meaning, they want to be guided by the faith that living an authentic life is the best life to live, the only life to live.

I would like to thank the Class of 2009 and every class, before and after, for putting me on, and keeping me on, the path to what I hope continues to be a more open and principled life, full of honesty and truth. Thank you for allowing an outsider into the HESA family, and for allowing my voice to have meaning. Thank you for reminding me that in a world of posers, being one's self is always enough. It has been a privilege to know each and every one of you, but most of all it has been an honor to have the FINAL WORD!

#### References

- Nash, R. J. (2004). *Liberating scholarly writing: The power of personal narrative*. New York: Teachers College Press.