

From the Desk of Dr Jenn Hardy

A quarterly-ish newsletter



Hello!

I thought I would try something different for this edition of the newsletter. Rather than writing an article full of bullet points and advice, I decided to share a bit more about my career story. I was inspired by the career stories submitted by several individuals as a part of my newest course.

For me, learning about the career paths other people have taken has been incredibly informative. It has taught me that there is a lot of room for changing, growing, and adapting our career path for different seasons of our lives. Though we may hold regret toward some of our career decisions (particularly missed opportunities), I think many of us have been able to use these experiences to inform our future decisions.

Life isn't about avoiding all mistakes. It's about learning from them so that we can choose better in the future.

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Part of my Career Story.

I still remember the pressure I felt my senior year of high school. Everyone would ask, with a smile on their face, "What are you going to major in at college?" Little did I know that a version of this question would follow me for the rest of my life.

Questions about my major have turned into questions about essentially every other life milestone: getting married, having kids, buying a house or a car. I can see far off in the distant future that these questions will be recycled once again, but this time they will focus on what my kids are up to.

Anyway, the college major question seems innocent enough on the surface. It's not something that requires a lot of deep self-disclosure. It isn't offensive or controversial. It's a safe opener in the hunt for some conversational common ground.

"What am I going to major in?" Good question. I spent many, many hours racking my perfectionistic brain for the answers. It seemed like it wasn't alright to admit the imperfect reality. I simply had no idea. Who the hell knows what they want to be when they've hardly had time to live in the real world?

Maybe I'm not giving people enough credit, but I remember assuming at the time that people would have taken an honest answer as a sign of laziness or immaturity on my part. I could imagine them thinking to themselves "When is she going to pick something already? She better not waste her time or her parents' hard earned money."

For better or worse, I picked math. The looks on people's faces told me that I was onto something good. With a big smile on their face, they would say, "Wow! Math! That's a hard major. Impressive!" Their smiles would make me smile. I smushed my anxiety down as best I could.

With my declaration, I thought the questions would stop. We all know they don't. The major question immediately morphs into the career question. "What are you going to do with that math major once you're done with school?"

How was I supposed to know? I grew up on a farm in rural Ohio. Everyone I knew was a teacher, a farmer, a factory worker, or a doctor. None of those options lined up very well with math. Well, on second thought...Math Teacher did. Now there's an idea with a concrete career plan. Because I was quite the geek in high school, people quickly "corrected" my teaching aspirations, offering the super-sized option of Math Professor. That idea sounded alright to me.

Boom. Done. Everyone was impressed. I had a plan. People would get off my back. Now, all I had to do was get straight A's in college, get into a doctoral math program, finish that program, write a dissertation, and get a professor job. Easy, right? Not exactly.

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Part of my Career Story.

I got to Calculus II in my second semester in college. Things weren't looking good. I studied for hours. I studied that book like it was my part-time job. I was a frequent visitor to office hours. My professor was a really kind person who was in teaching for all the right reasons. He had, in a previous career, been a philosopher and later a ballistics researcher before having the existential crisis that pushed him into the more altruistic career of physics professor.

He would say, "Jennifer, you know the answer. You must allow yourself to know." I would politely smile and repeat myself "But, I really don't know. Can you show me?" We'd circle round and round, repeating our phrases before I would eventually smile, thank him, and head back to my room to panic in peace.

I didn't know a lot about what it took to be a math professor except for two things: you needed a PhD and you better get perfect grades if you want to stand a chance at said PhD. I ended spring semester with a B and the realization that this plan wasn't going to work. I needed a new one before I headed home for summer break.

Scrolling through my university's list of majors, only one other option really stood out: psychology. Though I didn't particularly like the impression that I was copying my oldest sister by choosing psychology as a major, I couldn't resist my most obvious "back-up plan." My high school psychology class had been my favorite course during high school. It felt like a straight-forward option.

Though I was left playing a little catch-up starting my second year, the shift was powerful. My classes were straight-forward. We were talking about the things I loved to think about. I got to write and read a lot. It felt a little too good to be true. My career goal swapped out Math for Psychology, and we were all set. I would be a psychology professor.

(Well, until I changed my mind 10 more times before coming back to professor. Oh, and I'm not actually a professor, though I did spend one year wrangling a teaching position alongside my private practice. When offered the chance to apply to the permanent position, I opted out, because I liked being a therapist too much to give it up.)



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Lessons Learned from my Story.

1. Though it may be tempting to assume that everyone else has their lives figured out, it isn't necessarily true...even if they are a straight A student who is heavily invested in maintaining a persona of making hard things look easy. Yes, even they don't have all the answers.
2. Experience matters. I loved that I grew up in a farming community. It shaped me in ways I would never want to give up in favor of a more cosmopolitan life. A drawback to my upbringing is that my experience with career options was really limited. I only knew of a small fraction of the jobs that were out there. All experiences have limits. I once knew a guy who wondered aloud to his girlfriend what those strange tall plants were on the side of the road. She looked at him with shock and said "that's corn." His response was "that can't be corn. Corn is yellow." All experiences have limits.
3. Many career paths are not particularly straight. Take my professor's career path as an example. My friends and I were in awe of this guy who pivoted time and again. I wonder what he's up to these days.
4. There will always be people who try to push you to level up your career goals. It's up to you to figure out if they are seeing something in you that you are hiding from yourself or if they are simply living out our "more is better" culture.
5. You are not failing if you change your career plans. I would rather admit I picked wrong than spend the rest of my life with the wrong choice.
6. If it feels "easy" to you, it may be because the fit is just right. Take me with my psychology classes. My professors were excellent. They challenged us, and a lot of people struggled. My friends' honesty about their struggles helped me to see that it wasn't that the major was easy but that it fit really well with who I was.



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I could keep going here, but I think you get my point. I'm not someone who thinks everything happens for a reason. I do believe there is meaning that can be made from nearly every experience. Shaming myself for my inexperience about the world doesn't seem very fair. It's not fair for you either. My mistakes have often taught me more about my self than my good choices did. Our bad experiences often offer deep and powerful reminders about our must-haves in life.

I will dive into these ideas and more as a part of Explore: A Course for Exploring Therapy Careers. Check it out!