**A Career in Continuing Education—How Did We Get Here?**

Aged thirteen, my son, Edward, completed a high school assignment about his future career, saying he wanted to be a scientist, preferably a veterinarian. Fast forward another sixteen years and he began work at Pittsburgh Veterinary Specialty and Emergency Center, having followed his chosen path first to Cornell University and later to various internships and residencies.

I deeply suspect that none of us in Continuing Education ever wrote an essay in high school about our dream job creating, developing and implementing programs for adults as a program director or dean. Maybe we aspired to be an astronaut or a teacher, but not a continuing education administrator. This is not to say we are unhappy in our chosen career; often quite the opposite is true. But the path that led to our current position is not always a direct or obvious one.

Many administrators in higher education managing continuing education programs have begun in a different place altogether. Some of us started out as teachers, in pre-k, elementary or high school. But then a life-altering event resulted in a change of direction. We relocated, had a baby, pursued a higher degree or lost a job, and suddenly Continuing Education beckoned. Jane Schulman, Vice President of Adult & Continuing Education at LaGuardia Community College (CUNY) for the past decade, began her career teaching first grade; completed a Masters Degree in Career Counseling; was hired at the newly created LaGuardia Community College in the Division of Student Affairs; was then offered an opportunity to work with adults in non-credit and has never looked back. Another common path is from business, where we managed a book store or even a band and then had the chance to use this business acumen in another setting. Working in the non-profit world is yet another route some of us have taken, perhaps as a director of a literacy-providing volunteer organization or running a social service agency that serves unemployed and disadvantaged adults. Both of these positions can open up the possibilities of the world of high school equivalency, workforce development and career pathways.

So why is there no clear route to continuing education administration?

It is in the nature of the position to require a skill set that includes education, business and empathy for adults, which is a rare combination. Somehow we bring together all three skills, and if we lack one, we learn fast. We ask our peers, we go online, we take courses, we do all of the above with speed and care. To be a continuing education administrator is to think out of the box; to be nimble; to be innovative; to be both a risk-taker and cautious, remembering the trust placed in us not to waste money and not to get into the red; to turn a profit for the college while providing value for money for those who rely on us to help them get a job, matriculate into college, learn English or grow their businesses. When I was given the opportunity to found the Continuing Education Program at the City College of New York, I was told, “Be creative but be careful!”

No matter what has preceded our current position, there is no question that we are doing what we love, that if we wanted to work nine to five, five days a week we would have left Continuing Education long ago, and that we find setting up new programs hugely satisfying. We are never far from the realization that we are changing lives, sometimes one at a time and sometimes hundreds at a time. We have the means and capacity to shift the power equation for adults who deserve better than they have often received. Getting a job, a new job or a better job, succeeding in passing the high school equivalency, registering in college, and upgrading skills through certification and licensing are all transformative achievements that result in increased income, security and personal satisfaction for our students. We are extraordinarily fortunate to have the opportunity to impact people in this way. Perhaps we didn’t know all this at age 13; it has to be something we grow into. But once involved in Continuing Education, it is truly a lifelong enterprise.

Jane MacKillop, Ph.D.

Associate Dean, LaGuardia Community College (CUNY)

December, 2014