

**Developmental Portrait: Growth Through Adversity in Higher Education – Developing
Confidence, Persistence, Emotion Regulation, and Value for My Personal Goals**

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“Transition [is a] state of ‘becoming’ [which represents] a prime time for growth and development for the [transitioner]” (Barclay, 2017, p. 29). My time in university has consisted of challenges; however, my difficult transitions have also allowed for tremendous development. My growth through my undergraduate years began when I arrived at university. My freshman year introduced states of uncertainty, anxiety, feeling small, and experiencing a lack of belonging. Analyzing the experience using Schlossberg’s Transition Theory, I underwent a “positive emergent growth process” as I “mov[ed] in[to]” this “anticipated” university transition experience (Barclay, 2017, pp. 24-25). Through beneficial personal qualities, supports, and strategies, I developed increased confidence, persistence, and resilience (Barclay, 2017). I continued to flourish through my second year of university, namely, in the summer, when I wrote the Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT). Suddenly, feelings of self-doubt and frustration re-surfaced as I transitioned into my MCAT journey. Consistent with our knowledge of Chickering and Reisser’s Seven Vectors of Development, I was able to develop my emotion regulation and view my challenges more positively; I learned to manage my emotions and maintain purpose and integrity (Wise, 2017). Possibly the most important personal take-away from my university experience emerged through my transition into more serious career exploration. To elaborate through the lens of Marcia’s Identity Status Model, I was eager to arrive at identity achievement, consequently leading me to over-explore and overcommit (Sidani, 2021). Through the excessive pressure I experienced during the moratorium stage, I learned to view my personal and professional needs and goals as having similar value, while ensuring I select a career that I expect to enjoy (Sidani, 2021). Although my university experience has been difficult, and to some extent continues to be, I have also observed exponential personal growth.

Year 1 of University: Transitioning into My First Year of Undergraduate Studies

Personal Development: Developing Greater Confidence and Persistence

I carried a great amount of enthusiasm going into university. Despite this, I was also unsure what to expect out of my university transition. The first week of university began with a moderate level of anxiety. Following this first week, my anxiety began to quickly increase until it felt like it was no longer manageable. Everyday, following my classes, I attempted to complete my schoolwork. In each study session, I quickly grew frustrated as I was not achieving my desired level of performance. I built a habit of procrastination, which I had only minimally experienced in high school. I began to feel “marginal” and my confidence plummeted (Barclay, 2017, p. 24). I frequently doubted my abilities and felt the effects of imposter syndrome. Soon after the first month of university, I decided to “take charge of [my] transition” and adopted a more active role, dedicating increasingly more time to my schoolwork (Barclay, 2017, p. 24). This visible evidence of dedicating more time to school made it clear to me that I was seeing positive changes in my confidence and persistence.

Real-Life Experience: Applying to an Independent Research Program

The confidence and persistence I developed, starting from the second month of university, was exemplified by my experience in applying to an independent research program as a first-year student. I was able to recognize the improvement in my confidence, as a result of my motivation to apply to the program. Applying also required persistence due to my unique circumstances. To elaborate, due to unforeseen circumstances, I needed to make considerable last-minute changes, which put me at risk of having an incomplete application by the due date. The confidence and persistence I had built during my first few months at university were surely helpful. I did not allow this major setback to eliminate my hope of being selected for the program. Surprisingly, on the last business day prior to the application

deadline, the resources I needed to complete my application suddenly fell into place. I experienced an even greater surge of confidence and persistence, completing the lengthy application over a weekend and later gaining acceptance into the program.

Explanation using Student Development Theory (SDT): Schlossberg's Transition Theory

Schlossberg's transition theory describes how four domains can be examined in order to analyze an individual's transition, through a process of "taking stock" (Barclay, 2017, p. 25). Schlossberg's four domains are: Situation, Support, Self, and Strategies (Barclay, 2017). Schlossberg also describes other components to her theory, including stages of moving in, moving through, and moving out of a transition (Barclay, 2017). Analyzing the Situation domain, my transition into higher education was an anticipated transition, yet, I experienced feelings of anxiety and doubt. Research by Rosati et al. demonstrated a need to improve student affairs services in higher education as student participants expressed feeling marginal and "not feeling heard," similar to the emotions I experienced (2019, p. 113). This state of feeling small can be explained by Schlossberg's belief that "those in transition feel marginal, frequently, and as though they do not matter" (Barclay, 2017, p. 24). Schlossberg's concept of moving in continues to explain why I felt small and anxious as this "assessment and planning period" is expected to "prompt anxieties" (Barclay, 2017, p. 24). Examining Schlossberg's domain of the Self, my ability to emerge from the negative emotions I experienced as a first-year student was partly due to personal factors, including my qualities of striving to learn from others' experiences and my tendency to seek self-improvement. Schlossberg's Support domain can describe how environmental factors, such as social support from my older sister, "strengthen" my confidence and "encourage" my persistence (Barclay, 2017, p. 25). My older sister helped me in developing strategies such as controlling the meaning of my situation and managing the stress I was experiencing, through believing I could succeed. Evidently, personal qualities, available supports, and strategies contributed to

the development of my confidence and persistence. One point Schlossberg's transition theory may not emphasize is the availability of supports depending on an individual's cultural background. My Middle Eastern cultural background allowed for great social support from my family, due to maintaining strong familial bonds being a core value to my culture.

Reflection on Significance: Academic Achievement and Success

Developing confidence and persistence through my first-year transition is significant to my life as it has allowed for greater academic achievement and success. I have been able to maintain grit through my university courses, regardless of how doubtful I may feel concerning my performance in a course. I have also been able to persist through uncomfortable situations, such as interacting with professors, and consequently secure several extracurricular opportunities. In sum, the confidence and persistence I gained in my first year has had a positive impact on my academic achievement and success.

Year 2 of University: Preparing for the MCAT

Personal Development: Developing My Emotion Regulation and How I View My Challenges

In the summer of my second year of university, I began preparing for the MCAT. Although I was enjoying the gains in knowledge, I also experienced frequent feelings of self-doubt and frustration. I would display evidence of stress and emotional reactivity, such as crying, evoked by the challenges of balancing MCAT studying with other personal and extracurricular commitments. Throughout my MCAT journey, I observed a slow progression in managing my emotions and viewing my challenges more positively. During the middle and end of my MCAT journey, I noticed a greater sense of emotional calm and optimism, as compared to the beginning stages of studying. I developed the practice of making an effort to choose to be happy in all circumstances. At my lowest moments, I would give myself small

achievable tasks such as taking deep breaths. I began to view my difficulties as temporary and made the decision to be always proud of myself regardless of the outcome.

Connection to Real-Life Experience: MCAT Test Day

The improvements that I underwent in my emotion regulation and view of my challenges were evident in my emotional and mental state on the MCAT test day. I recall walking into the test centre feeling calm and at ease. My strong emotional and mental development did not allow feelings of stress or anxiety to negatively impact my test performance. I was proud of myself for arriving at that moment and not allowing myself to ruminate on the ramifications of performing poorly. I carried a positive attitude and redefined success for myself: at the very least, I put forth my best effort and gained valuable lessons and skills as a result of my MCAT experience.

Explanation using SDT: Chickering and Reisser's Seven Vectors of Development

Chickering and Reisser's Seven Vectors of Development include: Developing Competence, Managing Emotions, Developing Autonomy, Developing Mature Relationships, Establishing Personal Identity, Developing Purpose, and Developing Integrity (Wise, 2017). Chickering and Reisser believed that progressing through these vectors contributed to an individual's identity, most notably in the higher education context (Sidani, 2021). My MCAT journey's contributions to my identity, observed through my emotional and mental maturation, most relate to the vectors of Managing Emotions, Developing Purpose, and Developing Integrity. Firstly, Chickering and Reisser describe emotion regulation as "a developmental milestone for adolescents and early adults," explaining why my emotional development gradually progressed throughout my months of studying (Wise, 2017, p. 103). Applying the Managing Emotions vector, I was experiencing "fluctuating feelings" of excitement to learn and frustration surrounding my perceived level of performance (Wise,

2017, p. 103). I was able to grow as I learned “how to express [my feelings] in healthy ways, and... restrain them in healthy ways” (Wise, 2017, p. 103). As I progressed in studying, it became increasingly important for me to both express and acknowledge my feelings to others and to myself, respectively, while also restraining negative feelings, such as self-doubt and frustration, from hindering my performance. Environmental factors such as my supportive house environment facilitated my ability to express and restrain my emotions, appropriately. Although Chickering and Reisser’s theory may not account for this, it is important to note that although I experienced great familial support throughout my MCAT studying, receiving a positive response to my emotional reactivity improved over time. This slow progression in positive response can be explained by the expectation to refrain from expressing emotions, in my Middle Eastern culture. On another note, personal factors, such as my need to maintain purpose in the actions I take, contributed to my development. Elaborating through the Developing Purpose vector, my ability to restrain my negative emotions was supported by ensuring my MCAT preparation was meaningful. Making my own decision to write the MCAT, in pursuit of the goal of attending medical school, allowed me to persist through the difficult MCAT journey and ultimately experience personal growth. Reflecting on the Developing Integrity vector, my persistence in studying for the MCAT can also be attributed to my goal of keeping my personal value system of contributing my best effort consistent with my actions. Interestingly, in studying gender differences in progressing through Chickering and Reisser’s vectors, Foubert et al. (2005) found greater tolerance in female university students which may have also played a role in my persistence and resulting growth. All in all, the Managing Emotions, Developing Purpose, and Developing Integrity vectors help to explain my emotional and mental maturation throughout my MCAT journey.

Reflection on Significance: Improved Mental Health and Ability to Support Others

Carrying a greater capacity to regulate my emotions as well as a more positive outlook on my challenges has improved my overall mental health and ability to support others. I choose to prioritize my mental health everyday and understand that ease follows difficulty. I also experience the negative effects of stress less often, which has equipped me with a greater capability to support others through their struggles. As described by the Yerkes-Dodson curve, lower levels of personal distress allow for moderate levels of arousal when supporting others and greater levels of empathy and sympathy (Dys, 2021b). My challenging MCAT experience has given me the ability to better care for myself and others.

Year 3 of University: More Deeply Reflecting on My Career Exploration Decisions***Personal Development: Learning to Prioritize My Happiness and Health***

In the summer of my first year of university, I surprised myself with the decision to begin planning for a career in medicine; this career choice was a consideration I had never expected to make. In making this decision, I became engulfed in building myself up into the ideal candidate for the competitive medical school applications. My focus was so targeted towards skyrocketing my extracurricular involvement and maintaining my grades, that I forgot to enjoy my education. I was enjoying each of my academic commitments individually, but combined, they were overwhelming. Following the immense pressure I experienced from balancing MCAT studying with several other commitments, I noticed a change in my approach to professional growth, as I entered my third year of university: it became much more important for me to view my personal and professional needs and goals as having similar value. I began to value, more seriously, my happiness, while also learning to better prioritize my mental and physical health. Gaining an additional experience simply to increase my professional competitiveness was no longer worth the fatigue and emotional

strain that accompanied it. I am proud of my accomplishments, but I have also arrived at the preference of a much more minimal approach to extracurricular involvement.

Connection to Real-Life Experience: Resigning from a Volunteer Position

Learning to prioritize my happiness and health is evident through my recent resignation from a volunteer mentorship position. I maintained my involvement with the organization for an extended period of time. I enjoyed volunteering but also realized the importance of stepping back, guilt-free, as my busy schedule would have made it incredibly overwhelming to continue balancing the position with my numerous other commitments. It was clear to me that my choice to prioritize my happiness and health was manifesting through my decision to resign from my role.

Explanation using SDT: Marcia's Identity Status Model

Marcia's Identity Status Model describes how identity formation is achieved through the two processes of exploration, also referred to as crisis, and commitment (Sidani, 2021). James Marcia identified the following four identity statuses: Diffusion (characterized by low exploration and low commitment), Foreclosure (characterized by low exploration and high commitment), Moratorium (characterized by high exploration and low commitment), and Achievement (characterized by high exploration and high commitment) (Sidani, 2021). It is expected that university students display low commitment to a specific career area and pursue moratorium, in an effort to arrive at identity achievement (E., 2016), explaining my high extracurricular exploration. I engaged in extracurriculars in several different areas, such as education, mentorship, research, and healthcare, not only to increase my competitiveness for medical school applications, but also to ensure that I truly wanted to commit to a career in medicine. This high exploration was driven by the personal factor of me being eager to solidify my career goals, early. Moreover, a study by Marcotte and Lévesque (2018) found a

negative correlation, in university students, between anxiety and identity commitment, explaining the anxiety I experienced within the moratorium status. In my earlier years of university, I endured the anxiety that came with carrying the moratorium status, especially as the status is a necessary precursor for identity achievement (Dys, 2021a). Now, as a third-year student having engaged in high exploration, I feel that I have explored enough to have clearer career goals that are allowing me to slowly transition into identity achievement. Thus, the pressure associated with high exploration is no longer necessary for me, clarifying my shift towards prioritizing my happiness and health. I have experienced the effects of over-exploring, or rather overcommitting, which is not accounted for by Marcia's Identity Status Model. Marcia presents exploration as a positive endeavor that brings the individual closer to identity formation, and while this may be true, Marcia does not consider the negative implications of over-exploring. Throughout my undergraduate experience, I have felt the negative impacts on mental health caused by overcommitting, which has led me to adopt a mindset that prioritizes my personal needs, alongside my career goals. The environmental factor of accessible student-mentor relationships has solidified my choice to prioritize my health and happiness, as I have learned from mentors in the field of medicine that they have also developed this same prioritization through their experiences in overcommitting.

Reflection on Significance: Leading a More Balanced Life and Anticipating Greater Career Success

Assigning greater value to a positive mental state and to my wellness is significant as it has been allowing me to build a more balanced life and to anticipate greater career success. I have arrived at the decision to be much more selective in my extracurricular involvement, which has lifted a lot of pressure and stress. Furthermore, I expect that ensuring my career energizes me and brings me joy will result in greater career success.

Conclusion

I have passed through adversity as an undergraduate student but I have also seen myself grow. In transitioning into my first year of university, I saw an increase in my confidence and persistence. In applying Schlossberg's Transition Theory, I discovered that my personal qualities as well as available supports and appropriate strategies supported my development. Chickering and Reisser's Seven Vectors of Development showed how learning to manage my emotions and maintaining purpose and integrity helped with my emotional and mental maturation through my MCAT journey. Most importantly, Marcia's Identity Status Model illustrated how over-exploring during my undergraduate years, led me to care more deeply about my happiness and wellness. It is worthwhile to note that Schlossberg, Chickering and Reisser, and Marcia's theories can benefit from respectively considering the supports available in different cultures, responses to emotional reactivity in different cultures, and the negative effects of over-exploring. Despite the shortcomings in these student development theories, analyzing my experiences in writing this paper has surprised me by showing me the impact of reflecting on and communicating my development in an organized fashion. I am surprised by how much more confident I now feel in describing my undergraduate development. I am also surprised by how quickly I began to reflect on my life experiences, once given the opportunity, as if my mind had been craving this reflection time. Writing this paper has shown me the importance of reflection and has encouraged me to aim to incorporate more self-reflection into my life; possibly, encouraging dedicated student reflection time is a step universities can take to advance student development. Reflecting on the development we observe as a result of our challenges can be a healthy exercise that can help us view difficulty more positively. I am incredibly fortunate to be educated and to have had the opportunity to endure difficulties and learn from them.

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