

**Learning on the Journey:
A Humanities Odyssey from Academia to
Corporate America and Back**

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Learning on the Journey: A Humanities Odyssey from Academia to Corporate America and Back

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An experienced career services professional shared with me an aphorism he and his peers often use: “if you don’t know where you’re going you’ll end up somewhere else.” This paper is the story of my career-long journey. I started out to find one thing but ended up finding many other valuable things instead. Seen over time, my journey appears random, like the flight of a butterfly. As a story, it is like a butterfly pinned in a display case, stopped so others can see its characteristics and patterns. What appears random is a combination of serendipity and intentionality. *Reflection* results in course corrections. *Discipline* generates forward motion. *Agency*—the confidence that one controls one’s destiny—supports risk-taking.

The story’s foundation is a humanities education: undergraduate English major at a small liberal arts college and interdisciplinary graduate work in literature, history, and social science. My education cultivated perennially valuable skills in critical thinking, communication, and problem solving as well as a disposition to continued *Learning*. As a result, I acquired useful capabilities along the way.

Many of the lessons I learned throughout the journey were about job search principles familiar to career professionals and experienced job changers. Other lessons were about tools I needed to create relationships with people who were willing to take a stand for me. The story, though, is as much about how and when I learned as what I learned. I was largely self-taught. I did not have the benefit of working with career professionals until midway in the journey. I hope that the story of my journey, paused for examination, will provision job seekers in every career phase with principles and tools for their own journeys. I also hope the story of my journey will remind career professionals, whether more or less experienced, trained in career counseling or in business functions, of the credence and validity of enduring job search principles and techniques. Above all, I hope my story will confirm the value of a humanities education.

Setting Out

I set out to be a college professor. I majored in English literature as an undergraduate at Occidental College. My graduate work in American Studies and teaching assistantships at Purdue and the University of Iowa started me on the path. Then things changed. When I was finishing my PhD in 1975, traditional academic jobs were hard to find, especially for those of us in non-technical disciplines. They still are. I watched other graduate students in my department cobble together contract and part-time teaching jobs at various institutions. This did not seem like a viable long-term career track. I needed to find alternative opportunities. I ended up with a human resources job in General Motors. How I did so reflected current thinking and best practices at the time. However, I learned them by trial and error.

At first, I fell into the “is majoring in English worth it?” swamp where data showed that the market questioned the value of an English major. It still does. As recently as 2019, a Bankrate study ranked 162 college majors by median income and unemployment rate. English came in at 132. A 2019 survey of 250,000 college graduates by Payscale reported that one in five with a humanities degree said that, next to their student loans, their choice of major was their biggest educational regret, and in 2017, Market Watch called English “the most regretted college major in America.” Attitudes were no different in the early and mid-1970s, and it was worse for those with advanced degrees.

I also had to overcome prejudices regarding the relationship between liberal arts education and work. I was anxious because I did not know how to connect and articulate what I learned in college classrooms with the realities of the world of work, especially in contrast with other candidates who had studied science, technology, and business. It was difficult for me to assure my parents and in-laws that there would be a return for me and my wife, Barbara, on our

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investment in my education.

Furthermore, I encountered prejudices which I thought academics held of business people and which I thought business people held of academics. This was the 1970's. The Vietnam war continued to rage, supported by industrialists and disparaged by students and academics. I believed those in business thought of academics as intellectual snobs, cultural elitists, fuzzy thinkers, averse to competition, radical, impractical, isolated and taking refuge from the real world, performing tasks that were not work in fields that were irrelevant. I thought most academics believed business people to be unethical, motivated solely by profit, exploitative, narrow-minded, and uneducated. I needed to correct these misconceptions.

To begin, I established two tracks to seek employment following receipt of my PhD. During my doctoral program at Iowa I served as a graduate student representative to the boards of the mid-continent and national American Studies associations. I liked that work. It involved dealing with leading professors and graduate students from other universities on issues like conference planning and trends in curriculum and research. So on my first track I explored non-traditional career options outside the academy where I might leverage that experience and where academically cultivated skills could be useful and valued. The second track was to apply for traditional academic faculty positions. I pursued the two tracks simultaneously.

On the first track I quickly learned that I needed to gain internal strength and self-confidence in my worth so I could represent it to non-traditional employers of humanities PhDs. Initially I engaged the faculty and administrators that I worked with in my graduate programs at Purdue and Iowa, and in the American Studies associations. They shared predictable ideas with me: journalism, historical societies, museums, educational technology, presidential libraries, non-teaching roles in higher education, the federal government, think tanks, consulting. These were good places to begin, but I wanted more market knowledge and sought it on my own.

I found that, in reality, employers did hire liberal arts graduates. A late 1970's Midwest College Placement Association study revealed that over two-thirds of companies did so, averaging fifteen per-cent of total hires. The Bell System conducted longitudinal studies that concluded "humanities and social science majors in particular continue to make a strong showing in managerial skills and have experienced considerable business success." Studies of employers by UCLA, Michigan State, Midwest College Placement Association, Personnel Journal, and the University of Missouri concluded that employers wanted employees who

were not narrowly trained, but who could read, write, compute, solve problems and adequately express themselves. These were the factors that affected which candidates were hired and which were subject to negative decisions. I began to gain confidence that I could contribute beyond my subject matter expertise.

I hardly started my exploration of non-traditional opportunities when the second track yielded a newly-minted humanities PhD's dream job offer: a tenure track position as an Assistant Professor at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond. Strangely, this proved to be a dilemma for me. While it was an offer my fellow PhD friends would have killed for, I had reservations. I had been a teaching assistant at both Purdue and Iowa, and I had not found that to be particularly satisfying. Graduate teaching assistants were provided little to no training in curriculum development or delivery. I wasn't very good then at lecturing or facilitating discussions. Moreover, the thought of teaching the same courses semester after semester, year after year, felt like the kiss of death to me. The Babe Ruth chapter of my dissertation on "Popular Heroes of the 1920's" had been published as an article in the *Journal of Popular Culture*, but the prospect of generating more peer-reviewed academic research seemed tedious and lacking practical impact. Most importantly, I wanted to explore non-traditional options, and I had hardly started that. If I took the VCU job, I would always wonder what I'd missed. I looked back with regret on some opportunities I passed up in high school and college to concentrate on my studies, and I didn't like those feelings. In high school many of my friends were in the jazz band. Although I liked the music they played, I did not play an instrument myself. However, one day a notice appeared in the school's daily announcements. The jazz band sought someone who wanted to learn to play the bass; no experience required. I was intrigued, but too shy and too committed to my studies to answer the ad. It ran for a long time before they found someone. Since then, I've regretted the missed opportunity to be part of an ensemble.

In college, when the campus was embroiled in the controversies of the mid-60's I was asked to take over as editor of the school newspaper. I was respected because I was a good student. I was known to be a thoughtful and articulate writer but not associated with any particular side. I turned this down in favor of my studies. Here, too, I looked back with regret at a missed opportunity. If I accepted the VCU job, I knew I would again be in a position to regret what might have been. I declined the offer. My friends thought I was crazy, but I took the risk. That decision worked out well, and it changed my attitude toward risk-taking. I learned that it's important to have decisions to make. They clarify your values because,

regardless of the outcome, you know what you chose and why.

First Stops: Course Correction I

While I wrestled with the VCU decision, one of the other members of the American Studies Association board was working on a grant to fund two one-year positions with the US Information Agency's cultural affairs division. She and I agreed that such a position would be a good fit for me. Unfortunately, her anticipated funding got cut to two half-time positions. I offered what seemed like a sensible suggestion: combine the two into one full-time position and hire me! To my surprise, she agreed. In August 1975 Barbara and I were off to Washington DC where I was to be the US representative of a group of German high school teachers who were creating a curriculum on American culture to teach their students English. They needed to identify US-produced audio-visual materials to supplement the instruction.

The project leader was a tall caped German aristocrat. The lead teachers were a married couple based in Hamburg. Through this project, I was able to travel to Hamburg twice, once by myself in December and once with Barbara at the end of the project in June. This was our first experience of international travel together. On the December trip, I traveled on Icelandic Airlines from New York to Reykjavik to Luxembourg where I caught a train to Hamburg, my first experience with a European railroad. I was to stay with the Hamburg couple at their home. I arrived in Hamburg after dark and took a bus to their neighborhood. I had their address written on a piece of paper which I showed to the bus driver. Their home was just beyond the end of the line. I was the last person on the bus at the last stop. I knew no German, and the driver knew no English. So, adopting the common practice of those speaking to someone who doesn't know their language, he explained how to find my hosts' house very s-l-o-w-l-y and LOUDLY. While his volume and speed did not help me understand his directions, I did find their home. It was very comfortable, and the company was congenial. I learned a lot about their preferences and standards for the materials I was proposing to them. My judgements were based on topic content and theirs were based on cross-cultural applicability. It proved useful for the project to bring our perspectives about such tools as audio cassettes and filmstrips closer together. In addition, I had to adapt to the typical northern European breakfasts of brown bread and cheese, and my host gave me his "obscenic" tour of Hamburg by driving me through the red-light district.

While the project introduced me to international travel and began to make me aware of different cultural perspectives, the career development took place in Washington, DC. Barbara

and I lived there during the US Bi-centennial year, and there was much to see and do in and around Washington. All museums and monuments had special exhibitions. We were within driving distance of colonial and Civil War sites in Northern Virginia, Maryland, and Southern Pennsylvania, and we saw many. Friends and relatives visited us frequently to take advantage of the Bi-centennial celebrations. We caught Potomac fever. As the one-year US Information Agency project neared completion I tried hard to find ways to stay in the area and work for the federal government.

My co-workers had a different idea. Based on my work with the German project, they strongly encouraged me to apply for the Foreign Service. I tried very hard to get into the Foreign Service, taking the examination three years in a row. I always did well on the written examination, but I did less well on the interviews. A high introvert, I had not yet mastered the art of casual conversation on politics, arts, and international affairs. To get international experience to enhance my qualifications, my USIA colleagues advocated that I take a Fulbright lectureship outside the U.S., and Iran had an opportunity similar to my USIA project. To recognize the US Bi-centennial, Iran was establishing programs in American Studies at four Iranian universities. The idea was that if Iranian students knew more about American culture, they would be better job candidates for all the American companies that were moving into Iran. I was awarded a one-year lectureship to start the program at the University of Isfahan in what was at the time the second largest city in Iran. While the programs at the other three schools were placed in social science departments, mine was housed in the department of foreign languages. It was to be used as part of the curriculum for English majors, a perfect fit given my USIA experience. Isfahan's renown as "The Pearl of Persia" based on its Seventeenth Century arts and monuments added allure to the opportunity.

When I learned I had been accepted, I rushed home. Barbara and I had to look up where Iran was in our atlas. We decided that this would be a once-in-a-lifetime experience, not to be passed up even though it tilted me back to academia and would require continued job hunting when it was over. We decided to risk it.

Our experience in Iran was life-changing. The perspectives gained through living and working in a culture so very different than the one we were used to, especially a Muslim one, set us on a course for a life of openness to other countries and cultures. Living in Iran when it was building towards revolution gave us insight into events that shaped the relationship between our two countries for the next 40 years and more. The two temporary cross-cultural experiences furthered personal awareness and risk tolerance, influenced my

subsequent personal development and decision-making, and opened the way to new opportunities.

Listening And Learning: Course Correction 2

At the conclusion of my lectureship Barbara and I returned to Washington, DC in July 1977, eighteen months before the Shah fell. Without benefit of reliable telephone service, internet or email in Iran, I was unable to start my search from there. To call Tehran from Isfahan, for example, it was necessary to delegate the task of dialing to a low-level department employee and return hours later to take the call when it finally went through.

When we arrived in Washington, Barbara was seven months pregnant with our first son; I had no job and no prospects. Recalling how a colleague helped me get into the USIA, I set about networking furiously. I used conversations to gain knowledge of different jobs and organizations, amazed by what people found to do and how it satisfied them. I again applied for the foreign service. I tried to find government jobs that would enable us to stay in Washington, DC. I approached museums and other organizations that I thought might value someone with some knowledge of history and the ability to communicate and solve problems. I gained greater insight into which of my skills were valued outside the academy.

In the end, a friend of my father, a General Motors executive, introduced me to other GM executives who worked in Human Resources: the Vice President of Personnel, his capable second-in-command, and the Director of Placement and College Relations, among others. A conversation with one generated opportunities to speak with others in an attempt to find the right fit for a humanities PhD in an engineering-driven company. As I moved from one to another, I gradually learned smarter and smarter things to say. My first answer to what I was looking for was naive: I aspired to “get on the corporate ladder and advance.”

In speaking with many others, I came to better understand the role and needs of the human resources function in GM and the unique value that I, a humanities PhD with international experience, could bring. The PhD meant that I could discipline myself over a long period of time to achieve a goal. The interdisciplinary humanities focus of my degree meant that I could see connections across boundaries to innovate, and the international experience showed that I was sensitive and adaptable to different cultures. As a result, I was able to develop and articulate some vision of how I could uniquely contribute to GM over time. This encouraged decision-makers to see how I could benefit short-term and how the company could benefit long-term from placing me in a desirable entry-level opportunity.

This dialog took time, though. Given the sense of urgency I felt to land an income and the impending birth of our child, I grew impatient with what I perceived to be GM’s indecision. I issued an ultimatum: if you are interested, make me an offer; otherwise, I have to move on. As a result, I was offered a job as a Salaried Employee in Training on the corporate Personnel Administration and Development Staff that provided human resources services to the research and engineering staffs at the GM Technical Center in Warren, MI, a suburb of Detroit. Barbara and I relocated there in late October 1977, two weeks after the birth of our first son.

My position was a one-year rotational assignment starting with employment, hiring technicians and scientists, and moving to compensation. I discovered that I liked human resources work, and I found a group of congenial co-workers.

Reframing

I was pleased to have landed in a large and diverse corporation in a function where the work was satisfying. The experience of meeting, talking to, and working with men and women in GM, especially in Human Resources, dispelled the stereotypes I first encountered and demonstrated the proper—and more fulfilling—relationship between liberal arts education and work. Hiring practices showed that I had not been asking the right question. To successfully land the GM opportunity I had to reframe the quest. The question was not “what am I going to do with my education?” The more useful question, especially for candidates with humanities backgrounds, was “what is the work and what does it take to do it?” In other words, following John Stuart Mill’s admonition that “men are men before they are lawyers or physicians, or manufacturers,” it is important to distinguish between jobs in which one steps up to a task and applies oneself and professions in which school-learned knowledge is applied to work. As a humanities PhD, I qualified for jobs in which skills and judgment rather than subject area knowledge are applied, and in which managerial potential could be demonstrated.

This orientation fit with GM’s emerging business challenges. Roger B. Smith, GM Chairman at the time, said the “new generation of business leadership . . . must continue to compete in the traditional marketplace where goods and services are sold, yes, but it must also enter a new marketplace—a marketplace of ideas, where the forces that shape society have always been determined. Only leadership with many and varied talents can hope to be successful in such an ideological marketplace—and this is why the liberal arts in industry are assuming so much importance today.” The problem is that too often, as the then executive director of the American

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Association of State Colleges and Universities put it, “corporate presidents go around making lovely speeches written by Ivy Leaguers about the value of a liberal arts education, but somehow don’t communicate these views to their personnel departments doing the hiring.” Recruiters can be stuck asking what one is going to do with a liberal arts education so they hesitate to recommend them as candidates to their internal customers, hiring managers. Liberal arts students are risky because their career interests are undemonstrated, their ability to adapt can’t be predicted, and their skills can’t be pigeonholed into specific job requirements on requisition forms. Smith’s platitudes were no help to recruiters. I wanted to do something about that, and I soon got my chance.

Midway through my rotational assignment, I was transferred to downtown Detroit to join GM’s corporate Placement and College Relations activity which oversaw college recruiting of engineers and a few MBAs at universities GM considered to be its “key institutions.” The company aspired to collect their “fair share” of top technical talent from these schools. I worked closely with recruiters from various divisions to learn their organizations’ talent needs. I worked closely with top executives who oversaw GM’s relationships with a portfolio of the key institutions, including University of Michigan, University of Pittsburgh, University of Kansas, Marquette University and others. While working in that department I learned that GM’s experience in hiring liberal arts graduates was similar to that of other employers. Centralized hiring records showed that twenty-two percent of salaried employees and eighteen percent of upper management held liberal arts degrees. Non-technical jobs existed in manufacturing, finance, accounting, purchasing, personnel, sales, materials management, and quality control. I completed a study that showed over two-thirds of GM’s college hires were non-technical—split about evenly between business and liberal arts majors—and that there was no corporate oversight or selectivity exercised on the incoming stream of this talent and the institutions from which they came. I created a pilot program to recruit at ten elite midwestern liberal arts colleges where we found extraordinary students interested in opportunities with a manufacturing company. GM hired some of them even though a corporate hiring freeze was announced on the eve of the inaugural recruiting career fair. The results of this work won over nonbelievers in finance, engineering, and manufacturing functions who doubted the worth of this talent resource.

Initial work in GM’s personnel staff, at the Technical Center and in the corporate headquarters, confirmed my liking for human resources work, and it introduced me to executives, managers, professionals, and other co-workers who were

intelligent, committed, and good colleagues. I was able to make useful and important contributions. I felt I was accepted and treated well within the organization, and I had fun with my job. These became two touchstones that I used as a shorthand review of my progress and satisfaction year after year: was I having fun and did I feel well-treated?

First Landing: Reflection

At this stage, I had successfully transitioned from academia to corporate America, with a detour through a taste of the foreign service and a year abroad as an expatriate. The process by which I made this transition was largely self-made and self-directed. It was informed by two classic books: *Go Hire Yourself an Employer* by Richard K. Irish, “a comprehensive manual featuring proven strategies and techniques for job hunters,” and Richard Bolles’ *What Color is Your Parachute*, still positioned in 2020 (with a forthcoming 2021 edition) as “your guide to a lifetime of meaningful work and career success.” The process reframed my quest for non-traditional employment and allowed me to approach the market with a broad perspective and confidence in my own skills and experiences. Through networking I interviewed for information and discovered what motivates and satisfies others. This boosted my confidence: “I could do that.”

Networking also developed my knowledge of skills and traits that employers valued in entering talent regardless of field of study. I learned to tell stories that showcased my experience and learning, and I applied my new knowledge to the search. I used creativity to identify and articulate transferrable skills and to gain opportunities, such as combining funding to create the USIA position. I exercised courage to take risks, declining the VCU job and embracing the opportunity in Iran. I was candid and said what needed to be said to move opportunities such as the USIA project and GM’s interest forward. I was courteous and treated others as I would want to be treated. This turned out to be a differentiator. I learned that I should be seeking a person as much as a position, someone who was willing to gamble on someone like me because of a shared connection—a mutual acquaintance, similar educational background, common interests—something that allowed them to be comfortable championing my potential. This was the case for me with General Motors. I met a VP level executive who had been a Harvard professor and one who had graduated as a history major from a small liberal arts college. I met another key decision-maker who had been a history major at Yale. In today’s market, decision makers must connect with a diverse candidate pool. Mentors and sponsors, often of different races than candidates, remain critical links. Education and placement organizations facilitate

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connections. While individuals of different races may share personal connections, their mutual interest is in the advancement of top talent.

Although my approach was rooted in internal strength, confidence in my self-worth, and demonstrable skills, it was neither systematic nor well-disciplined. It was only later that I learned how I could bring discipline to the quest and connect a desirable immediate opportunity to a longer-term future. At that time, all I knew to do was to talk to as many people as I could and try to learn as much as I could about where I might enter. Later I learned to also seek for knowledge, experience, contacts, and learning that would get me closer to bringing a longer-term vision to life.

Corporate America

To my detriment, I did not apply a similar process to my GM career development. Instead, I relied on mentors and sponsors to put me forward for opportunities. This worked well for a time. In 1981 when the finance and insurance organization then known as GMAC moved its headquarters from New York to Detroit I was the first person hired in Detroit. I left the placement and college relations staff to hire the people in Detroit who would replace those left behind in New York. I later moved to supervise the executive and expatriate compensation area for the GMAC organization. Here again I found congenial colleagues who valued my work and treated me well, including the personnel director, my direct managers, key employees in my department, and other co-workers. After four years at GMAC, I moved back to the corporate personnel staff to research and write policies and papers on people strategies. Here, too, the department director and my peers were fun to work with, and we did important work. I also was able to continue college relations work for GM at Yale and Columbia universities in collaboration with high level executives who oversaw the GM relationships with those schools. As such I headed teams of alumni to promote GM philanthropy and recruiting at those schools. I was judged a high potential employee and was on a fast track for an executive position in less than ten years.

An unexpected but welcome diversion occurred in 1986 when I received an offer to join the path-breaking GM-Toyota joint venture in Fremont, California, NUMMI (New United Motor Manufacturing, Incorporated). This placement was partially a result of an executive's knowledge of my California roots. Bill MacKinnon was a top executive on the personnel staff, GM's key executive for Yale, and a mentor to me since my first days in GM. He was remarkable in his ability to retain details of his employees' personal interests and circumstances. For example, in passing I once mentioned that my father, a

Californian, had served in the Navy during World War II on a heavy cruiser, the USS Salt Lake City. Later Bill ran across an oil painting of the ship. He managed to send my father a photograph of the painting which my father had framed. It hung on my father's wall till his death. It now hangs on my wall in tribute to my father and to Bill. Bill recalled my California background along with my GM track record and high potential designation, and he sponsored me for the Bay Area assignment. By then Barbara and I had another son, born in 1981 (the year my mother died), and the relocation to California enabled our boys to connect with many relatives, including their grandfather, the World War II Navy veteran.

The three-year NUMMI assignment was another life-changing experience. Toyota's system of automobile manufacturing and its supporting organizational culture and leadership philosophy were very different from GM's and yielded higher quality and lower cost vehicles. My exposure to it led me to an assignment in GM Europe, a newly-formed organization that was directing the transition of all GM's European operations from mass production to lean production. During my interviews, I asked GM Europe top management to speak about their challenges in leading the change. Listening to their responses allowed me to show how my experience with the Toyota Production System could be applied. I leveraged that knowledge to ask for a promotion to accept the assignment with GM Europe. As a result, two roles were combined, and I was promoted to executive in charge of both management and organization development to support the transition. My experience in GM Europe was enlightening but challenging, and I struggled. This is chronicled in an unflattering *Harvard Business Review* case study about corporate use of expatriate assignments and the preparation and post-assignment utilization of expatriates.

Shock And Grief

In 1992, at the conclusion of the three-year assignment in Europe, I was repatriated to Detroit and back into the corporate personnel staff. At the time, the North American auto industry was in a depression. Although in my new job I led development and delivery of quality improvement workshops for 1200 employees that resulted in reductions in business process time and effort, it felt like my real job was to teach supervisors how to tell people they were no longer needed. Furthermore, colleagues I had worked with over the years were leaving the organization. I had a succession of three bosses in less than a year. In the absence of many of my past sponsors, mentors, and bosses, my struggles as an expatriate caused decision makers to perceive my earlier career negatively, a 'reverse halo effect.' Reputation tarnished,

my job performance assessment in my new organization suffered. I no longer felt like I was having fun, and I no longer felt I was well-treated. I learned that I should have added a third question to my simple assessment questions: was I comfortable in the organization's culture? My experiences in the Japanese and European organizations made me feel like an outsider back in GM North America.

By 1993 GM was offering severance packages, and I was encouraged to accept one—or a demotion. My failure to adapt my job-seeking experience to a career development process inside a huge multi-organization corporation came home to roost. I lacked internal coaching and mentoring resources to develop realistic self-awareness of my situation and the range of potential GM career options.

The feedback I received with the offer of a buyout was painful to hear. My experience in GM Europe and how it was perceived colored perceptions of my prior experiences as well as how my performance in my new job was evaluated. I was offered an opportunity to be a candidate for another job in the organization, but I was told I finished “dead last.” At the same time, the corporate business objective was to eliminate the number of executives and highly paid individuals, and I was no longer a high potential investment. I was confused, hurt, disappointed, and felt isolated. I sought counsel from my past mentors and sponsors, one of whom had left GM himself. In a breakfast conversation one shared a similar experience in his past. When he was confronted with the prospect of lowered responsibility he requested a more drastic multi-level demotion and worked his way back up. However, I took the communication I received personally and felt compelled to leave the organization.

To deal with my hurt, I went through something like Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's stages of grief. Although my job at the time of my repatriation felt okay, the current downturn in GM North America generated rumors and signals of change that resulted in worry and concern. Still, I was shocked to learn that the layoffs and terminations applied to me. At first, I experienced denial—this couldn't happen to me given the investment the organization made in me and my career. Furthermore, I'd accrued valuable human capital in lean manufacturing, the human resources systems and leadership practices that supported it, and how to lead the organization change needed to implement it. I became angry and blamed my plight on the loss of the enlightened people with whom I'd worked over the years and the unenlightened group that remained. In fact, I hadn't invested in maintaining and developing internal social capital. Too proud and disappointed to bargain, I decided to leave GM and accepted the buyout.

I became depressed and sought help, first from a trusted

friend and counselor at church and then from a clinical psychologist. Meanwhile, I asked for GM sponsorship to become certified in Myers Briggs and to attend the Dale Carnegie Course. I thought the former could help me develop a consulting practice and the latter would help me rebuild confidence and address some of the feedback I'd received in the communication about my severance. GM was agreeable. As it turned out, it was not necessary for me to put the Myers Briggs training to use as an income opportunity. However, the Dale Carnegie course was very inspiring, as much for what I saw it doing for the other participants as well as for how I benefitted. I was so pleased with the outcomes for me and others that I volunteered as a “graduate assistant” in programs before leaving Detroit to take a new position in the Phoenix area. This involvement helped me move forward from depression to new opportunities.

Discipline: Course Correction 3

Fortunately, the GM severance package included the services of an outplacement firm, Drake Beam Morin. Once I started sessions at DBM, I was able to accept my situation, commit to a process and timeline to find a new opportunity, and take advantage of the significant financial windfall in the severance incentive. Working with DBM's disciplined processes helped me understand and expand the self-made process that took me to the US Information Agency and General Motors years before. Using their professional guidance and tools, I again set out to seek opportunities on two tracks. First, I sought human resources opportunities. Second, reversing the thinking I used when leaving graduate school, I enlarged my perspective. I wondered if there were universities that would value an academic credential, experience in corporate human resources, particularly education and training and organization development, and significant international experience. Thunderbird, then known as The American Graduate School of International Management, did so. It was a stand-alone graduate business school in the Phoenix area that specialized in international management and had a reputation for applied education. I accepted a position in executive education starting in January 1994.

What did I learn at DBM to enable a transition? First, a mid-career transition is a three-phase process that should be treated as a job in itself. It takes time and disciplined effort. It is a marketing job, and the product is you. The first phase is the *Foundation*—assessments, coaching and counseling, and reflection to gain self-knowledge. I examined my past experiences to discern what satisfied and dissatisfied me in my prior jobs and organizations—working climate, culture, rewards and recognition, personal development, advancement,

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and bosses. I came to understand my values, my priorities, and what motivates me. I distilled my likes and dislikes, experiences and accomplishments, and personal characteristics and priorities into job preferences and likely best fits. These in turn informed the resume and interview messages that I crafted in the second phase: *Preparation*.

In the Preparation phase I developed the tools needed to execute a search: an introductory message, resume, network of contacts and coaches, research resources, interview techniques, list of references, negotiation tactics. I then deployed these tools in the third phase: *Campaign*.

In phase three I used my introductory message to generate opportunities to share my resume. The resume created opportunities for further conversations, both networking and interviews. Some conversations helped clarify my job preferences. For instance, interviewing for a senior human resources position in one large company, the HR vice president characterized his career as human-resources focused from high school onwards—undergraduate business major to graduate degree in industrial and labor relations to a series of progressively more responsible HR positions. That gave me second thoughts about mainline HR work. It sounded dreadfully dull in contrast to my internationally-oriented experience to that point. Ideally, though, first interviews were to lead to additional conversations with decision-makers which would result in an offer and the opportunity to analyze it and negotiate terms.

One of DBM's best values for me was providing a place to go every day to conduct my search work. I accessed office space and equipment, telecommunications service, and administrative support. I settled in among a group of peers who were all focused on the same task—finding the next opportunity. We became a support network, sympathizing and celebrating with one another as opportunities came and went. I became friends with another person who was leaving GM. We had not known one another in our GM roles. A Harvard graduate, he shared Harvard job search resources with me. We compared feelings about whether it was worth staying in a place we did not like for the sake of perks like company cars and substantial benefit coverages. The DBM environment and services made it easier to conduct a search for employment as a job. I secured a new position in four months.

In planning and executing a marketing campaign, I learned three more valuable lessons.

1. Seek first to be helpful. I learned to present how I could help prospective employers with their needs or problems rather than focusing on how their opportunities would benefit me. To support this, I also learned the tools of consultative selling and the ability to present my

accomplishments in a Problem-Action-Result format that connected my experience to the needs of potential employers. This lesson holds true for networking as well as for interviewing. A networking conversation is most effective when you can help your contact understand how he or she might help you before you ask for assistance.

2. Realize that the process is two-way. I learned to seek a mutually beneficial match. Therefore, I had to find out as much as I could about the new employer as well as communicate as much as I could about myself in that context. That was not hard. I used my research skills to prepare questions and then listened. People love to tell you about themselves if you ask. When I was looking to leave Thunderbird, senior leaders at Southern Methodist University (SMU)'s Cox School of Business opened up about their opportunities and challenges, just as the GM Europe interviewers did years earlier, and I was able to relate those to my experiences at Thunderbird. In the process I became convinced that Cox School leaders, especially the dean and the associate deans for the faculty and the graduate degree programs, would be wonderful colleagues, from whom I could learn much about managing a business school, not just my own area. And so it was.

3. Understand that it is a numbers game. The more leads I could generate the better my chances of landing a job. As I interviewed for information, my network expanded. I tried not to leave a conversation until I had at least three referrals. I realized I needed only one offer, so I was not discouraged by rejection. I learned that “no” is not just an answer. It is an opportunity to get feedback, to learn objections to my candidacy, and how to overcome them. For example, as a candidate for HR positions, I featured my experience with NUMMI's innovative human relations systems that supported the Toyota Production System. Organizationally, Toyota and GM managers shared responsibility to advise local managers in the plant. When I was considered for a senior HR position at a prestigious Ivy League university this structure made my line HR experience, especially in labor relations, look weak. With that feedback, I could adjust how I presented my experience for subsequent opportunities.

As I worked with DBM to leave GM and recalled what I'd learned in seeking to transition out of academia into corporate America, I developed a model that structured my campaign. It combined the strategic planning pyramid I learned in GM Europe with a sales funnel that narrowed as I progressed through the stages of an opportunity until I, the sole survivor,

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dropped out the bottom of the funnel. I populated the resulting diamond shape with information specific to my search. It allowed me to specify the mission of my quest, its vision, my beliefs and values. It displayed my strategies: search for HR opportunities in industry and academia, sell my experience in Total Quality Management, NUMMI, and my international experience as differentiators. Be open to other possibilities. And it included ten initiatives for a successful campaign. The execution of those initiatives would generate contacts that would pass through the sales funnel: qualification, development, offer, negotiation and acceptance.

Second Landing: Reflection

After I applied disciplined assessment, preparation, implementation, and analysis, I knew that I should still remain open and flexible to unforeseen and unimagined opportunities. Even exploring my second track, university business school executive education did not enter my thinking until I saw a Thunderbird ad in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. I knew when I saw it that the position could be a good match for me. My first contact generated a request for more information about my capabilities in administration, marketing, and program design and development. This generated a five-page response that gave specific detailed explanations of my experience and accomplishments in those areas. Through the subsequent communication I discovered objections to my candidacy: transition from corporate to academic organizations, revenue generation, and pay. I countered these through dialog and offered constructive solutions. On the transition from corporate America to academia I explained that I was frustrated with a bloated GM bureaucracy, and that I sought an opportunity where my day-to-day decisions would make a tangible difference in the organization's success. While I originally thought that my experience in corporate training and organization development would be my experience most transferrable to a business school, my success as a recruiter showed my ability to influence and persuade which supported my ability to generate revenue. On pay, I reminded them that I specified an acceptable compensation range during the initial interview and if they were unable to support that I was willing to walk away, disappointed that we had wasted each other's time. To help, I suggested adding a course on Strategic HRM for me to teach that would boost my pay to a level I could accept. We came to an agreement, and I spent ten successful years at Thunderbird generating millions of dollars in revenue through personal sales and managing a department that generated \$8 to \$20 million in annual revenue depending on the organization charts. After a few years I asked to be bought out of my HRM course so that I could concentrate on the revenue generation activities that I liked,

was good at, and benefitted the school more than my teaching efforts.

Academia

In university-based executive education work I found my niche. At Thunderbird I was able to work on important international business problems with the best faculty and people in many companies that had jobs similar to those that I had in GM. The programs we developed and delivered generated significant revenue for the school, enhanced its reputation, and benefitted faculty. When Thunderbird entered a downward spiral due to late 1990's market changes in graduate business education and 9-11's impact on foreign student enrollment, I was able to find a similar position at the Cox School of Business at Southern Methodist University (SMU) in Dallas, a full university rather than a stand-alone business school. I retired in 2018, after nearly fifteen years at the Cox school.

An Executive Education job was the only one I would ever want in a business school. I led entrepreneurial businesses with responsibility for staffing, product development, marketing and sales, operations, profit and loss. Because the programs I offered were non-credit, I could select only the best faculty to develop and deliver experiences targeted to specific business and career development problems without regard to entrance requirements, credit hour specifications, or examinations. The results for participants and their sponsoring companies were immediate and tangible. My teams had to meet the challenges of fast growth, turn around, international expansion, and industry downturns due to economic contractions and unanticipated shocks such as 9-11 and SARS. I had access to the brands and resources of prestigious educational institutions. I was able to work with many companies in a variety of industries to provide the management development components of solutions to their most challenging and vexing business problems. I was long-tenured at two schools in a high-pressure industry that typically turned executive education leaders over rapidly. The answers to my annual touchstone questions—was I having fun, did I feel well-treated, and was the culture compatible—were always net positive.

The Journey: Reflection

The principles and processes I used to transition from academia to corporate America and back again have not changed. The tools have. People with liberal arts and humanities educations still need to overcome misconceptions that limit their career options. Data is available to do this. *How Liberal Arts and Sciences Majors Fare in Employment*, a 2014 report from the National Center for Higher Education

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Management Systems and the Association of American Colleges and Universities “provides a much-needed corrective to claims that most liberal arts graduates—those with a degree in a humanities, arts, or social science field—are unemployed or unemployable.” The same study’s information can spark confidence in candidates. It found that ninety-three percent of employers agree that “candidates’ demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is more important than their undergraduate major.” These are the same skills that employers valued in the 1970’s and 80’s. The study also showed that while entry level salaries for liberal arts majors may be lower, over the course of their careers liberal arts majors close the earnings gap with professional majors. This is especially true for those with advanced degrees.

Although core skills of thinking, communication, and problem-solving remain key, a 2013 Hart Associates Study of employers identified additional competencies that twenty-first century employers value: innovation, ethical judgement and integrity, and the ability to work with others from diverse cultural backgrounds, unsurprising in times of complex global challenges and fast-paced change. These traditional and newer skills track with what contemporary placement professionals find to be the most highly transferrable and what management development experts look for in those who aspire to higher positions. Employers ultimately value people at all levels who:

- are aware of their own personality styles and behavior preferences, how they are perceived by others, and how that impacts their ability to carry out their roles.
- are discerning about the styles and preferences of others and possess interpersonal communication skills to motivate them and build effective teams.
- work with others to solve boundary-spanning problems.
- communicate direction to mobilize large groups and lead change.
- align their personal values with their organization’s and can pursue opportunities to challenge the organization when needed.
- create trust based on competence, reliability, and reciprocity in relationships.

People with liberal arts and humanities educations possess these skills and traits in abundance. Therefore, candidates and employers should be able to acknowledge the real relationship between education and work, especially at entry levels—a demonstration of achievement and intelligence, discipline and skill, breadth of perspective and the ability to learn that can be applied to a task. Fortunately, new twenty-first century tools are available to support seeking opportunities to do this:

- “Flipped” classrooms focus on discussion of concepts and knowledge acquired through outside resources, allowing people to learn more from their fellow students.
- Projects and internships, especially in community service, provide skill-building practice and contribute to solving social problems.
- Assessments that profile individual strengths generate insight to facilitate collaboration.
- Increasing numbers of reliable and valid methods that minimize subjectivity and increase predictability:
 - assess capacity to solve problems and deal with complexity.
 - confirm attributes like motivation, openness, and perseverance.
- Design-thinking tools help align work and life views and support journey planning.
- Formal coaching and mentoring provide ongoing feedback that supports application of new learning and behavior change.
- New perspectives on diversity and inclusion encourage non-white candidates to discern and articulate the unique value that they bring based on their sources of difference; many organizations now prepare them to do so and facilitate connections with prospective employers.
- Social media, online, and virtual resources generate networking opportunities and support research on organizations and prospective employers.

It is up to candidates to undertake the work of discovery. It is life work as well as career work. It should start early, in college or even high school. I started near the end of graduate school when I decided to seek employment opportunities outside the traditional academic path. Early on I reframed the quest with a proper understanding of the relationship between education and work. I learned how to differentiate myself from other candidates and how I could add unique value to organizations. From the beginning, I networked to gain contacts and information. I later learned of additional resources and how to organize a disciplined campaign. Through that I came to understand a customer-focused recruiting process. Over time I used reflection and self-analysis to identify values, priorities, and goals. I applied research and creativity to gain market knowledge. Although I learned these lessons along the way, starting out I did one thing right. I committed to excellence in completing my education and honing the liberal arts skills.

When it came time for me to leave GM, thanks to DBM, I

learned to focus on what's first, as well as on what's next. I learned that finding work I loved meant finding an organization in which I could comfortably exercise my values and passions as well as my skills. It's an identity quest, and it takes time. As Pro Bronson writes in "What Should I Do with My Life?" (*Fast Company*, 66, January 2003 pp 69ff) "your calling isn't something you inherently 'know,' some kind of destiny." It involves discovery and development of talents that you didn't have coming out of college. While analysis, discipline, and rigor are important, your decisions shouldn't be wholly analytical. You must also listen to your heart. As Bronson concludes, "we are all writing the story of our life. It's not a story of conquest. It's a story of discovery. Through trial and error, we learn what gifts we have to offer the world and are pushed to greater recognition about what we really need." We also learn choice is not one-way. Doors don't close forever.

Settling In

I set out to become a college professor. I closed that door, but I later discovered that the higher education value chain includes elements that precede and follow the core transfer of information that takes place in a classroom. The chain includes activities to get people to come to the school, to look after them while they are there, and to keep them engaged when they leave. Many experienced business executives who turn to education late in their careers think only of teaching. I was able to expand my perspective and learn that while I did not excel in the classroom, I excelled in advocating for the value of my institution and getting people to it. I was able to return to academia where I excelled in building teams that could support exceptional experiences for experienced adults. Those experiences enabled them to learn from their instructors, their own experiences, and those of others. As a result, their individual and organizational performance improved, and many went on to new opportunities. In the end, my career journey transformed many other careers. The story of my journey will equip job seekers to make their own successful journeys and career professionals to help them navigate. It will give all readers confidence in a humanities education as the foundation.

Author Biography

Dr. Frank Lloyd is the former Associate Dean of Executive Education at Southern Methodist University's (SMU) Edwin L. Cox School of Business, where he led development and delivery of award-winning executive leadership programs that transformed careers and innovative corporate partnerships that transformed organizations. He was

the driving force in the creation of a national center of excellence on Latino leadership, and he was instrumental in the launch of the James M. Collins Executive Education Center, one of the nation's premier learning facilities for working professionals. Dr. Lloyd joined SMU's Cox School from the Thunderbird School of Global Management in Arizona, where he was Vice President of Executive Education. Prior to joining Thunderbird, Dr. Lloyd was a human resources executive with General Motors, focused primarily on employee and organization development. Among the highlights of his career, he was responsible for organization development and leadership training for GM Europe during its transition from mass to lean production, and he was the first GM Human Resources manager assigned to New United Motor Manufacturing, Inc. (NUMMI), the historic joint venture between GM and Toyota noted for its innovative labor management relations and the introduction of the Toyota production system and human relations methods. Dr. Lloyd's work at SMU combined with his prior experience at the Thunderbird School and General Motors, gives him over 30 years global experience in the development of high performing leaders and organizations. Dr. Lloyd is an emeritus member of the Board of Directors of UNICON, the Global Consortium for University-based Executive Education, an association of the top 100+ business schools worldwide. He served on the national board of Inroads, a forty-five year old international organization with the mission to develop and place talented underserved youth in business and industry and prepare them for corporate and community leadership. He is the past chair of the board of Daystar US which mobilizes resources to support Daystar, a non-denominational Christian university in Nairobi, Kenya whose mission is to prepare servant leaders for Africa. He is also a member of the board of Literacy Achieves, a Dallas, Texas based non-profit that equips non-English speaking adults and their young children with English literacy and life skills to promote their self-sufficiency and well-being. Dr. Lloyd was a Fulbright lecturer at the University of Isfahan in Iran. He also served as a U.S. Information Agency curriculum consultant for Germany. He earned a master's degree at Purdue University and a Ph. D. at the University of Iowa. His undergraduate degree is from Occidental College. He holds an Executive Certificate in Nonprofit Governance from The University of Texas at Dallas' Institute for Excellence in Corporate Governance.