

## **Eric Lehman: The Advanced Degree Trajectory<sup>1</sup>**

February 2014

“Sure, sure,” Eric Lehman said, as he wrapped up the conversation with his sister. “I think you’re right. I can finish off those applications quickly.” He sighed, put down the phone and turned to open his laptop to start working. Talking to his sister was always helpful and her advice to move forward with his applications to CSU Sacramento and CSU Stanislaus was just what he needed to hear. Eric knew he had taken a chance in only applying to the English Department at UC Davis for his PhD instead of a number of different programs. But in his world, there weren’t many options. As an older student with a pre-teen son who was not interested in re-locating, Eric’s only choice had been the same department in which he was completing his BA.

Eric had maintained a high GPA at UC Davis. He was also very astute in his use of the funding available to him and was successful in gaining a number of merit scholarships. His educational trajectory had been so smooth, in fact, that not being admitted for the PhD had come as a bit of a surprise. Yet he also understood that the admissions process was complex and complicated and not necessarily a reflection of his abilities or talent. Fortunately, the application deadlines were still open for the Masters degree programs in Literature at the two CSUs that were within commuting distance. Getting a Masters degree would allow him to continue to develop his writing and teach at a community college.

Eric was forty-something when he had returned to school to complete his undergraduate degree nearly four years earlier, and his intentions were broad and fundamental. “I believed that school was going to offer me a better life in some capacity whether it be more of an intellectual fullness or a better job, and that is what really motivated me,” he said. Eric was also intent on being a role model to his son and focused on learning many of the informal aspects of academia that help make a students life a little easier.

Now, as he turned to fill out the applications for the Masters degrees, Eric realized that deep-down he was still interested in working towards a PhD. Would a Masters degree be helpful to him if he decided to apply again once his son had graduated high school?

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<sup>1</sup> This case was prepared for use as the basis for class instruction and discussion by Sylvia Sensiper, PhD, Director of the Guardian Professions Program, Office of Graduate

## **Growing up and Foster Care**

Eric was very young when he was placed in foster care at the time of his parents divorce. “It was when I was about 4 years old and it was only for a short time,” he said, “maybe three to nine months.” Eric moved around a lot as a child but ultimately ended up living with his father, a police officer and his step-mom. “My experience may be different than other students in campus undergraduate support programs because I was in foster care for only a short time. But it did affect me in ways that are hard to explain because there was a break in my experience of being cared for at a very young age.”

Eric went to a Catholic school and was a prodigious reader but only a marginal student. “I read extensively and all the time. If I found a book I liked, I would rather read than study.” He did well on tests but his family did not place a high value on getting a college education. “Only one brother went to college and received a degree,” Eric said, “and he had a baseball scholarship. I don’t think my parents really understood why anyone should go through higher education.”

## **The Why and How of Returning to School**

In 2009, dissatisfied with what he considered a ‘dead-end’ job in shipping and receiving, Eric decided to seek some advice from a friend of a friend who was working on a degree in career counseling. His father also suggested that he “go back and take a class” at San Joaquin Community College. Eric’s desire to be a good role model for his own son was also a primary motivation. He knew that if he started working on his degree it would be easier to encourage his son to continue on and go to college.

Eric wasn’t entirely sure of his direction when he started classes, but was willing to let things develop on their own as he began to discover his interests. He also made sure to learn about all the bureaucratic processes involved in a large academic institution.

To think through the best financial strategy for his education, Eric consulted with a friend who had returned to school later in life and also a school counselor at San Joaquin CC. He filled out the FAFSA and found he was eligible for a Cal Grant, but was advised not to use more than two years of the funding. In this way, when Eric transferred to UC Davis, he still had nine quarters in which he would be eligible for Cal Grant funding.<sup>2</sup> This made a difference as he knew too many students who used this state funding at the community college level and then were not eligible for any additional quarters when they transferred to a four-year university.

Eric also made it a point to develop relationships with his professors. He wanted them to know about his interests and goals so that he would be able to request recommendations. Recommendation letters are an important part of scholarship applications (as well as

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<sup>2</sup> Cal Grants are state funding administered by the California Student Aid Commission and do not have to be paid back.

[http://www.csac.ca.gov/pubs/forms/grnt\\_frm/Understanding\\_My\\_Cal\\_Grant.pdf](http://www.csac.ca.gov/pubs/forms/grnt_frm/Understanding_My_Cal_Grant.pdf)

graduate school and job applications). In his second year at SJCC, Eric was able to secure \$3,000 in scholarships, in part because he received excellent recommendations from his professors. He also received an additional \$495 to help with the cost of books. The funding was valuable of course, but Eric also found that completing the applications was beneficial to helping him think through what he wanted from his education. The applications all required him to formulate a statement of purpose or a roadmap of intended academic and career goals. “You have to have a mini-personal statement of where you are going, what are your past accomplishments, and some of the challenges you have overcome,” Eric said. “Formulating a statement that I could use and adapt for other scholarships was really beneficial and helped me articulate some of my goals.” At UC Davis, Eric was awarded \$15,000 in scholarships. Some of the funding was awarded because he was a re-entry student but the James and Leda Fullmore scholarship was a merit-based scholarship. “I really kept an eye on my GPA because I knew that it was linked to my financial circumstances.”

### **Deciding on a Career Path at UC Davis**

By the time Eric transferred to UC Davis he was more certain about his career path and knew it included literature and teaching. This was an idea that evolved from remembering his past interests, talking with friends and also a mentor he had through the Guardian Scholars Program. “A teacher from an online class suggested that English might be a good major for me, and I also remembered an early career exploration in which I thought about being a poet,” Eric said. A counselor ultimately helped him think about teaching literature at the community college as a professional goal. Eric had always loved words and reading, but teaching high school, with its required curriculum, did not sound intriguing. “High school entails too many requirements and I would rather teach adults,” he said. “The idea of being a teacher as well as doing some sort of research motivated me.” So he began to set his sights on an English BA and then going on to get an advanced degree.

Eric found a mentor through the Guardian Scholars Program, Matt Carter, with whom he discussed general academic and career issues. “We met at least once a month,” Eric said, “and talking with him was really beneficial because he helped me put things into perspective. Matt had a PhD and worked in the library.” As an older student, Eric was very focused on the academic aspect of academia. “I was very much aware of how much older I was than the average student. It wasn’t so apparent at the community college because that is a feeder institution for many things. But once I got to Davis, I was usually the oldest student in each of my classes.”

## Applying to Grad School

As a transfer student, Eric didn't have a lot of time to consider whether or not to apply for an advanced degree program. If he wanted to continue on into the fall of 2014, after he graduated in the spring, he needed to apply for PhD programs in the fall of 2013, which was only his second year at UC Davis. In April of 2013, Eric attended a workshop offered by the Guardian Professions Program and learned more about what he needed to do to prepare a competitive application.<sup>3</sup>

The application process for any advanced degree program is time-consuming and complicated and not simply because of the application components. Applicants must establish that they are prepared for advanced work. For a PhD applicant this means demonstrating that one knows a great deal about the discipline to which they are applying and that they already have some research experience. This is usually articulated in the statement of purpose, a narrative that explains the applicants' research interests and contextualizes those interests within the broader framework of the discipline. In a statement of purpose an applicant also describes the research they have already conducted, any papers they are in the process of writing and publishing, and a professor or professors at the university program to which they are applying whose work is similar to theirs and who may be a good mentor.

Some universities also ask for a personal history statement in which the applicant describes their personal background, including a description of achievements despite life challenges.<sup>4</sup> Depending on the program and discipline one is applying to, an applicant could be asked for the following as well: required test scores, a resume or curriculum vita, a writing sample, and a diversity statement to be used for awarding scholarships.<sup>5</sup>

Eric began his application by taking a preparation class for the GRE during the summer. "I took an online class which was excellent because it allowed me to study for the test whenever I was able to and I did that right up until my test date." The application also asked that he submit a writing sample of 15-20 pages so Eric took an independent study class to prepare for that. "It was my first attempt at a longer paper. With the quarter system, we usually don't have time to write longer papers, so most of my undergraduate work is 5-10 pages long." Eric scored in the 89% on the Verbal portion of the GRE and the 72% on the Quantitative. Given his background, he didn't study as much for the analytic writing section and he didn't do as well as he thought he should. Eric submitted

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<sup>3</sup> The UC Davis Guardian Professions Program offers assistance to former foster youth who are interested in pursuing advanced degrees.

<sup>4</sup> The University of California, Berkeley has a very good description of what goes into each statement and the links below offer tips and suggestions.

<http://grad.berkeley.edu/admissions/apply/personal-statement/>  
<http://grad.berkeley.edu/admissions/apply/statement-purpose/>

<sup>5</sup> The GRE (Graduate Record Exam) is a general admissions exam used by most PhD programs and some Masters programs. The test is similar to the SAT.

<http://www.ets.org/gre>

his application before the December deadline and then came the long wait. Most applicants don't hear until February or March of the following year.

To be competitive, an applicant needs a good GPA and test scores, excellent recommendations, and personal statements/statements of purpose that demonstrate that they understand the discipline and what constitutes good research in their given field. But not every applicant is a good fit for every department and there are many other factors that play into acceptance into a PhD program. Many schools do not accept their own undergraduates, feeling that they would benefit from diversifying their educational experiences and attending other institutions. Sometimes departments don't have enough funding for new students and only make a few acceptances in any given year. Acceptance also very much depends on the pool of applicants that apply and if an applicant's interests line up with those of a faculty member who can take on an additional student to mentor.

Eric understood all these reasons and that they really had nothing to do with his qualifications, but when he found out in mid-February that he hadn't been accepted, he still he couldn't help reflecting on some of the ways in which he might have created a better application. "I didn't practice for the analytic writing section of the GRE test because I know I write well. But had I read more about it during my preparation class, I would have known more what they were looking for and probably moved up an entire point." Eric also felt he might have had a better chance with a more polished writing sample. "I was told by some professors that we are at a disadvantage under the quarter system. There are probably applicants from other universities who are on the semester system and who are used to writing 30 page upper division papers because they have the time to do so."

### **Taking Stock and Moving Forward**

Eric recovered quickly from this set-back however, and stayed focused on his long-term goal to teach at a community college. He quickly adapted the statement of purpose he had written for the UC Davis application to fit the requirements for the two CSUs within commuting distance and applied for a Masters in Literature at each campus. By early June he had been admitted to CSU Sacramento State and confirmed his desire to enroll. "I'll be working on a Master's in Literature and also completing a certificate program that will allow me to teach college composition and rhetoric. The certificate is a bonus as it will help me when it comes time to look for a job."

Whatever his future held, Eric was still happy with his decision to return to school. "Being a role model for my son is a huge inspiration. But I am also motivated by knowledge itself, just being educated is a big motivator for me. Even if I don't get the perfect job, I'll still have this education and intellectual flourishing. That is really, really important to me as I believe it helps me make better life choices overall."