

Lessons Learned: My Non-Traditional Journey in Family Science

Patricia Kain Knaub, Ph.D.
Oklahoma State University

ABSTRACT. My essay traces a fifty year journey from a high school teacher to professor to administrator(s) to a consultant from the perspective of now being retired. Arguably it could be concluded that I had an unlikely career considering the time and place in which I grew up and was educated. The focus is on the factors influencing my personal transformation, the lessons learned along the way, and the application of those lessons to the role or roles I played.

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Direct correspondence to Dr. Patricia Kain Knaub at pat.knaub@gmail.com.

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I did not follow a traditional path into my family science career. By traditional I mean moving in a predictable line from an undergraduate major into graduate school and then into a professional role. Rather, I would describe my journey as a circuitous route that twisted and turned and was, to a large extent, the result of my gender and the cultural/historical context in which my life unfolded. However, I learned lessons at each stop along the way that propelled me forward into a highly satisfying and rewarding career. Family science, feminism, and higher education leadership provided the foundation for both my personal and professional life.

The Early Years

With college completed at the University of Nebraska, I found myself in my first real job, a high school teacher in a small, western Nebraska town. I say “found” because my situation was more a result of meandering than a planned route. My college course of study led to the job of being a high school home economics teacher, but, truthfully, I never believed I was destined to actually be a small-town teacher. I had been involved with a young man on and off for several years, and it appeared we would strike out for California or someplace equally exotic. When this relationship ended, I began to think of becoming a flight attendant. I had always wanted to travel. At that time being a flight attendant was more glamorous than it is today (think Pan Am or TWA circa 1960). To be safe, however, and without a great deal of thought about location, I applied for a teaching job—just in case. Timing, it is said, is “everything”, so “just in case” is precisely what happened. However, this is where I found that I loved teaching. I also discovered developing unique and imaginative approaches to curriculum delivery was a calling that remained with me throughout my professional career.

I grew up in a family that encouraged pursuing personal talents. Nothing was said about limitations because I was female. In fact, my father, in particular, emphasized the importance of education and that I needed to take responsibility for myself so as not to be placed in a position of needing to rely on someone else. If there was a “prince charming” fine, but I shouldn’t plan on it. I was fortunate in that both my parents had attended college and expected that I would pursue a college degree. Such was not the norm in the small, rural community in which I lived. Most of my female classmates were planning to marry shortly after high school graduation. Expecting to go to college cast me as an outlier which was then uncomfortable, but in time proved to be an asset.

My Midwest childhood was spent in the post-World War II years and adolescence during the 1950s and early 1960s. It was during my school years that I learned girls/women were neither encouraged nor expected to excel. To my dismay, by the time I graduated from high school in 1957, it was clear that women were expected to place their future aspirations, even their own identity, in the male they would eventually find rather than in themselves. A college degree for women was viewed more as an insurance policy, something to fall back on, rather than preparation for a career. This meant that as I grew up, I received two conflicting messages: one, that I should pursue an education such that I could take care of myself, and two, as a female,

I was expected to find a husband and place my life in his care. Resolving these conflicting messages proved a strong motivator for me.

Growing up, my primary interest was music having found that studying piano came rather naturally. It was something I could pursue outside of school with private teachers free of my peer group. Because I thought my destiny was in music, I had not seriously considered other options. When I was confronted with just what I would do with a music major, I was advised to prepare to teach instrumental music. Because I could not visualize myself as a small town band director (women did not get jobs in bigger schools), I decided that was not for me and changed to home economics. I did not come to this decision as a result of an aptitude test or advice from a counselor. I had read some brochures and talked to friends. In other words, I stumbled into my major. As a result of this lack of guidance, I came to appreciate the importance of role models, mentors and a supportive environment in which to make life decisions; something that I carried with me throughout my career.

I attended a small, mediocre high school which meant my initial transition to college was challenging. Beginning with this experience, I have maintained that providing support programs and services at points of transition improves the opportunity for success. Wherever possible, I implemented them.

During my collegiate days at the University of Nebraska, students preparing to teach home economics were required to take courses in each of the disciplines making up the field; I enjoyed some areas, such as nutrition, more than others, such as design, which was beyond my scope of talents. During this time, I especially found the child development and family courses interesting; as well, I found the supporting courses in sociology, psychology, and anthropology to be much to my liking. This broad preparation proved to be invaluable when, much later, I became dean of a college that included departments focused in each of the areas (nutrition, design, human development, family science and hotel/restaurant administration).

I was surprised that my initial job was in a small town; I was even more surprised that I would find my husband there. We were both first year high school teachers in neighboring communities when our respective principals asked us to represent our schools at a meeting about preparing for emergencies by building bomb shelters. This seemed like a bizarre topic, but we were in the midst of the cold war. The meeting turned into a six week course within which we found we were more interested in each other than the subject at hand. Over those weeks, we learned that although we had just met, we had graduated the same day from the University of Nebraska. He had completed college on an athletic scholarship. Because of an extra year of eligibility, he had the opportunity to begin graduate work and was midway toward a master's degree. He wanted to complete it as soon as possible. Thus, my interest in graduate school emerged as I began to seriously plan for my own future.

We married the next spring. Looking back, I learned that if you choose to marry, marry your equal. This does not mean marrying someone just like you. What it does mean is that the other person's experiences, qualities, talents and accomplishments are admired and that there is a

sincere dedication to nurturing each person's (and the relationship's) continued development. We have been supportive partners throughout 50+ years of our personal lives and careers.

Finding My Calling

The decade of the sixties and through the early seventies provided an interesting cultural soup within which my adult life took shape. It was a time of immense social change in which all institutions were being questioned from the definitions and purposes of the family, to education, religion, and government. It was a time of great tragedy from the assassinations of American political leaders to the tensions surrounding the unfortunate and unwarranted Vietnam War. At times, I felt as if the wheels were coming off our whole society. Fortunately, it was also a time of great optimism for the possibility of a new and better future. The civil rights movement encompassing voting rights, antidiscrimination legislation including Title Nine which opened educational opportunities for women, and the women's movement each contributed to a sense that our country's institutions could be transformed in a way that maximized individual potential. I discovered I very much wanted to play a part in this effort. Subsequently, I developed a career long dedication to applying transformational leadership principles in my roles as a professor, mentor, administrator, and, in organizational leadership.

The summer of 1963 was pivotal, and, looking back, I can confidently say it provided the spark that lit my professional career and shaped my political views as an adult. I was accepted into a graduate program in child development/family science and educational psychology at the University of Nebraska. My first courses focused on the developmental stages and challenges of school age children and family dynamics. This was my introduction to graduate education and I absolutely loved it. It was challenging; it was fun; and, the classes were filled with students who were equally interested, resulting in intellectually engaging discussions. Professor Beverly Fowler remains one of the most influential people in my life, for it was she who introduced me to graduate education and encouraged me to continue. It was also in these courses that I made a lifelong friend, mentor, and academic colleague, Dr. Jacqueline Voss, who was a fellow student completing her coursework as I was beginning mine.

The Feminine Mystique, a book acquired as a gift from my husband, was published in 1963. It became one of the catalysts for the women's movement. Reading it in the fall of that year opened my eyes and changed my life. From the mid 1960s through the 1970s, women's issues (i.e. equal pay for equal work, Title IX providing equal access to education and sports, questioning gender roles) were making it to the forefront of popular interest and academic inquiry. I was in my graduate program during this same timeframe, and it had a profound, transformative and lasting effect on my personal and professional life. As my graduate coursework progressed, I focused on the factors involved in gender role development and the resultant implications for individuals, families, and education. Because I had these additional years of academic exposure at a time of great social change, I believe I approached my adult life much differently than my peer group. Most of my female cohort did not pursue graduate education; many married even before graduating. Thus, in both my high school and collegiate experiences, a woman who pursued education and a career was not at all the norm.

A controversial family form referred to as “dual career,” emerged in the late 1960s which was of interest to me personally as well as academically. The controversy was focused on the potential effects (primarily negative) on marriage and child outcomes. A whole host of issues related to women working outside the home were yet to be dealt with such as day care and who/how family work was accomplished. My first research projects, beginning with my master’s thesis, focused on the effects of a dual career lifestyle on adolescent girls’ career aspirations. I was drawn to this question as a result of the years I had spent in high school classrooms but also because this was the lifestyle I wished to live.

I began teaching family science courses while I was a graduate student and continued for the next two years as I gradually progressed through my doctoral studies. By this time, the courses I was teaching were well developed and I was receiving encouraging evaluations from students. It seemed natural to enrich my courses with gender role information, and, since my family now included a daughter, it was a living laboratory of the emerging “dual career marriage.” I occasionally used “us” as examples. Soon I was being asked to give talks at various organizations, interviews for newspaper articles and, even write guest pieces. In the spring of 1971, I received an unexpected invitation to join the faculty of an experimental living/learning unit, “Centennial College.” Faculty, it was explained to me, were selected from a variety of disciplines based on student recommendations and a review by a committee of students and faculty. After I accepted, I learned that I would be the junior faculty member by both years of age and faculty rank (I really had no rank. “Instructor” doesn’t count.) Having never let such things bother me very much, I plunged ahead. Luckily, the other faculty members accepted me as an equal so it was never an issue. I suppose all of us knew we were selected because of our teaching success and faculty rank didn’t matter.

The two years I spent as a Centennial faculty member shaped the rest of my career. Beyond the joy of working with highly motivated students (former NCFR President, Elaine Anderson, for one), was the enriching experience of working with highly motivated colleagues dedicated to quality instruction. I worried that I had lost two years toward my doctoral studies, but I gained so much from the experience that I didn’t care. For the remainder of my career, I sought out experiences that involved interdisciplinary, holistic growth opportunities for myself and others.

Throughout the elongated years of my doctoral program, I was active in organizations (national, collegiate, and community) that championed women’s issues. I also was a founding faculty member for the women’s studies program at the University of Nebraska. I developed and taught a sociology course, “Women in Contemporary Society,” which became a popular multi-section course soon requiring a second faculty member.

With my doctorate completed in 1975 at age 35, I had found my calling. I was anxious to teach, to establish a research program, and, ultimately I wanted to move into administration. I joined the faculty in the Department of Human Development & Family at the University of Nebraska as an Assistant Professor. Again, I was not following the prescribed route; traditional wisdom would recommend that I take a position at a different institution other than the one from

which I graduated. I would not disagree. However, my employment decision involved consideration of my family as well as myself. My husband, having completed his graduate work, had recently moved into an administrative position and, my daughter, then eight, was doing well. It was just the right thing for me to do at the time. On the other hand, my doctoral program, which was interdisciplinary and primarily focused on family science, gender, and higher educational leadership, was taken through different departments and on a different campus from the department in which I was to be a faculty member. It provided some of the desired academic distance and in the end proved to be a good decision.

Building a Career

As with any profession, there are “dues to be paid” and a “path best followed” to ensure success as an academic. However, I found that the path was not well articulated; and, that in many ways it was to be discovered as I went along. I concluded from my own experience as a young faculty member that academic departments, colleges, and even academic associations have an important stake in the development of the next generation of scholars; it is too important to leave to chance.

I enthusiastically began my academic career. I was excited to finally be the real thing! I was assigned to teach four, three-hour courses (two sections of life-span development and two of marriage and the family). This department did not support time for research unless one held one of the few Agricultural Experiment Station research appointments. This was not an unusual departmental approach at the time; many programs were transitioning from being primarily teaching to a better balance between teaching and research.

Teaching was natural for me so developing and delivering courses was interesting, even easy. Developing a research focus was more of a challenge, especially in light of the heavy teaching assignment. The first few years were difficult. I realized that if I were to be successful, I needed to develop a research program. My dissertation, based on longitudinal data regarding adolescent girls' education and career decisions, provided the information for my first paper. Following that, I continued to study emerging family forms: dual career families, remarried families and farm families in which one or more of the parents were employed off the farm. Gradually, the department goals changed and three courses were considered full-time, leaving twenty-five percent of my time for research.

In 1982 I was appointed as a research scientist (NE Agricultural Experiment Station) to a twelve month position with half my time devoted to research. As a result, the next ten years marked my greatest research productivity (Meredith & Abbott, 1988). Participating in the multi-state project (S-191) focused on farm families who were in difficult economic times of historical proportion was my most engaging project. Later, I became interested in the area of professional ethics and in studying environments that best promote faculty productivity.

During my years as a professor, I had the opportunity to become more involved in activities related to the overall university. I had always enjoyed stimulating interaction with

faculty from other disciplines and responded when asked to serve on councils and committees where I could learn more about those disciplines and just how the university functioned. Two of the most important in this respect were the Research Council and Teaching Council. Both councils were charged with recognizing innovation, rewarding achievement, and, encouraging faculty development; both had good-sized budgets to be awarded by the councils; and, both were made up of faculty members from throughout the institution. I learned a great deal serving on each one but especially the research council. The breath of research and the intricacies of being published in a diversity of outlets were enlightening. Having this experience served me well when I was later in a position of providing a supportive environment for faculty scholarship.

Another important experience was being selected to participate in a year-long program offered by the UNL Center of Applied Ethics in the College of Law. Participants were chosen from throughout the University so again I had the advantage of interacting with a diverse group of faculty (i.e. zoology, law, education, political science, agriculture). The goal was to improve students' development of professional ethical standards.

Each participant received a small research grant to use in developing a program for their college. I left Nebraska before I could implement my plan; however, based on the survey conducted with the grant, a graduate seminar in professional ethics and a series of symposia were later offered at my new Oklahoma State University position.

Throughout my professorial years, I continued to be committed to women's issues. I served on and/or chaired the Chancellor's Commission on the Status of Women, the Governor's Commission on the Status of Women, the UNL Title IX Compliance Committee, and Women's Studies Steering Committee, in addition to being a member of other academic and non-academic task forces and organizations. Gradually, I realized if I were to make the kind of difference that I would like, I needed to be in a position with some authority. Distributing my time too broadly would not accomplish much. Primarily, I needed to focus on just what I may have the capability of influencing.

From Faculty to Administration

While in graduate school, I had determined that ultimately I wanted to be in higher education administration, preferably a dean. I was privileged to attend several leadership development programs but especially the "Leadership Identification Program" offered by the Association of Administrators (Association of Public and Land Grant Universities) about midway through my doctoral program. An outcome was that each of us developed a personal plan to reach our administrative goal. This process guided my direction.

After serving as a professor for fourteen years, a short term as an interim department chair and, three years as an associate dean, I was named dean of the College of Human Sciences at Oklahoma State University. It seemed that serving as dean would allow me to bring together much of what I had experienced as a faculty member and associate dean. Also, I believed passionately in the potential of human sciences colleges and the programs contained within them.

I looked forward to the opportunity to strengthen, and, I suppose, prove their worth to the institution where they were located as well as to the national academic community. My goal was to use the lessons I had learned to form the initiatives I would undertake as dean.

I believe that when one moves into an administrative role such as dean, one has come to a fork in the road and from that time forward the primary focus is on creating an environment in which others can be successful. I also have long accepted that organizations, like people, have a life cycle. In organizations it is about a ten year sequence. As such, they are born, accelerate their growth during the early creative years, mature and, unless there is a “rebirth” every five to seven years they begin to decline. Organizations function best with a continuous renewal cycle as a planning priority. Organizational rebirth can occur out of necessity from a crisis (often a financial one) or through strategically planning new directions leading to new goals, new enthusiasm and, a new cycle in the life of the organization (Oakley & Krug, 1991). A change in leadership of an organization, such as dean, provides an opportunity for renewal. I used this model throughout my years in leadership roles, I believe successfully.

While leaders are not necessarily role related, leaders are change agents and leadership holds the key to positive social change and ultimately to transforming institutions. I attempted to support leadership development whether leaders by role assignment such as department head or as faculty members, graduate students or undergrads with the goal of instituting change that would maximize the opportunity for success.

I was also supported in leadership development earlier at UNL and at OSU. Following my second year as dean, I was privileged to attend the Management Development Program at Harvard’s Graduate School of Education. The program brought together administrators (assistant/associate deans, deans and vice-presidents) relatively new to their roles, most with two to three years of experience. The goal was to provide leadership skill development through an intense case study approach enhanced with expert lectures and discussions often lasting way into the night. Study groups of eight or so analyzed case studies with individuals in the group presenting the case from the point of view of one of the actors in the case. I found this process to be helpful throughout my years as an administrator. It taught us to first look at any situation as accurately as possible through the eyes of each of the individuals involved. It became an invaluable problem solving tool.

Both from my own experience and observing the experience of others, the transition from graduate student to faculty member is not easy. For most, it is a steep learning curve made harder if there is little guidance through the process.

Based on a survey in which prolific scholars were asked which work environmental factors they perceived as being most important to their success as a researcher, a faculty development program was initiated (Knaub, 1993). At that time, thirty percent of the faculty had been in the college and OSU for two years or less. Over fifty percent of the new faculty members had just completed their doctoral degree. It was clearly in the college’s best interest as well as that of the new faculty members to provide them with the best opportunity for success.

We deemed this faculty development program, Faculty Scholars. Each faculty member was released twenty-five percent of their time for participation. Led by college administrators and enriched by visiting experts, meeting together two hours weekly over the academic year provided an opportunity to bond with other new faculty. This proved to be a clear positive outcome (Weber, Engle & Knaub, 1995).

Promoting scholarship, including discovery, integration, application and teaching, was the overall goal. We stressed the need for balance between research, teaching and service. Few new faculty had first-hand experience with the process of acquiring extramural funding. Grantsmanship became a signature part of the program culminating with a group visit to Washington, D.C. Each developed a concept paper outlining a potential research project which they presented to three agencies for feedback. The faculty scholar program, now in its twenty-first year, has evolved over time but has retained much of the original elements. It played an important role in attracting and retaining faculty and, a critical role in increasing extramural support for scholarship in all its forms (Weber et al., 1995).

Graduate students are primarily mentored by their advisor. However, the mentoring tends to concentrate on the research project the student is pursuing. In our attempt to invest more broadly in the next generation of scholars, we developed a graduate seminar required of all students across college departments, which would address the transition and preparation for the envisioned career. We focused on such overarching topics as trend analysis, leadership, missions of post-secondary institutions and the implications for scholarly careers, the roles and responsibilities of the modern scholar, and, the process of grantsmanship. I taught this seminar up to the last semester before I retired; it was a joy.

The transition from high school to college also required a supportive environment. Orientation courses are standard at most institutions. However, we wanted not only for our students to be oriented but to develop a sense of community. Beginning with a book club, in which each student read the same book over the summer then came together during the fall in small discussion groups, upper division mentors worked all semester with new students. Topics covered in the seminar deal with many of the issues prevalent among freshman from study skills to dealing with homesickness. We believed our approach to the first year was significant in the college which continued to have one of the highest retention rates on campus.

An organization, such as the National Council on Family Relations, also has a stake in and can make a significant contribution to the development of the next generation of scholars. During the year I was President, I was pleased that the Board of Directors took up the challenge of initiating several new opportunities for students and new professionals (i.e. Student /New Professional Development Forum, First-Timers Reception, Negotiating the Conference). David Wright also provided leadership in initiating a Task Force to develop a mentoring program.

When I began my role as dean I had not had first-hand experience in working with alumni and friends. However, I was eager to do so because early on I realized that if I was to be successful in leading the college to the aspired level, increased private funding was necessary. It

seemed logical to me that involving a cadre of advocates, eager to give back in time and treasure to an institution they love, would be an avenue by which this could be accomplished. Through the help of alumnae and friends who shared enthusiasm for the college and its programs, an *Associates* group was formed. The executive committee, each with a history of giving, actively participated in planning activities and provided valuable guidance on a host of topics. The group played an integral role in any of the successes accomplished during my years as dean. The substantial increase in private funding enhanced the overall academic experience through an increased number of scholarships, professorships, research funds and improved facilities. I learned that working with alumni and friends of the college was one of the most enjoyable aspects of my years as dean.

I can confidently state that the tenets of family science were very much present in my work every day throughout my career. Providing atmospheres that encourage the maximum opportunity for student and faculty development, as well as that of colleagues when I served in professional associations was at the core of my philosophy in any role I played. Knowledge and skills in building and maintaining relationships guided decisions. In realizing the goal I established while still in graduate school, I found the role of dean to be highly satisfying during an extraordinary period in my life. After eighteen years, I judged the college to be in a very good place, and I was ready to move into another chapter of my life.

From Administrator to Consultant and on to Retirement

As I was winding down my tenure as dean, the OSU Foundation CEO and I began discussing the potential of developing a women's philanthropy program. Although we had taken a three year hiatus due to funding cuts, my college had sponsored a successful women in philanthropy program for ten years (Knaub, & Johnson, 2003). The Foundation was interested in a comeback, however, this time as a University-wide program, housed in the Foundation. This new opportunity, to reinvent a college-based program into one engaging women from throughout the university, presented an exciting challenge. I agreed to serve as a consultant for the next two and one-half years.

The program that emerged was *Women for Oklahoma State University (WOSU)*, a diverse group of women, both alumnae and friends, who shared a passion for inspiring leadership and giving through their support of OSU. In other words, the goal was to shine a light on women who had made a significant contribution through leadership and philanthropy with the goal of inspiring others to follow. Fundraising focused on an endowed scholarship fund to recognize academics as well as philanthropic and volunteer activities among OSU's students.

It was a highly satisfying time as I witnessed the organization's development and maturation. *Women for OSU* exceeded expectations as fundraising excelled and the group's signature event, the annual symposium, drew sell-out crowds and successful regional events were added. I officially retired in 2010. I have continued involvement with the group by chairing the fundraising effort; however, now in the role of volunteer.

When I was thinking about retirement, I concluded that a soft landing would be better than a hard one. By this I meant, a dean's role is nearly a 24/7 intense job. It would be very difficult for me to just stop. It would be like jumping off a merry-go-round while it is still rotating at full speed! The two enjoyable years with the Foundation provided a comfortable soft landing while at the same time contributing something positive and I hope enduring to the university. My non-traditional journey as a family scientist was a great run.

Patricia Kain Knaub, Ph.D., is the Regent's Service Professor & Dean Emeritus, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK and President of the National Council on Family Relations (NCFR) 1992-1993.

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