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# Changing Pathways

TiBerni Hall

*Xavier University of Louisiana*, [pathways@xula.edu](mailto:pathways@xula.edu)

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TiBerni Mignon Hall

*Changing Pathways*

After graduating from middle school, I expressed concern with attending my feeder high school for a few reasons. I felt the need for a school with ethnic diversity and a globally recognized education with a rigorous curriculum. North Atlanta High School was agreed upon, a school outside of my district and a thirty minute drive away from home. North Atlanta at the time offered smaller learning communities, what they called pathways, such as a Center for the Arts, International Studies, Journalism/Broadcasting, and Business.

My desire was to enter as an International Studies pathway student, where the curriculum consisted of multiple foreign languages, multicultural literature, comparative religion, anthropology, and so on. That goal was pushed aside during class registration; all slots for International Studies were full due to priority given to feeder middle school students having opportunities to register their 8th grade year. To my dismay, I was placed in the Center for the Arts pathway. The Center of the Arts pathway curriculum consisted of theatre, public speaking, ceramics, dance, spoken word, and chorus. Unfortunately, I can't hold a note, I have two left feet, and speaking in front of complete strangers gives me mild anxiety.

On the first day of school, I entered my English class and, to my dismay, only African-Americans and Hispanics were present. Shocking for a predominately Caucasian school. I received syllabi from teachers, read them, and the classes didn't seem rigorous at all. In fact, most of the material I had covered previously during my 8th grade year. Not satisfied with my classes, I met with the Center of the Arts Administrator. I told him of my initial request to be in the International Studies program for challenging course-work. He listened then asked, "What middle school did you attend?"

I replied, “Jean Childs Young Middle School.”

He laughed and in so many words told me that a student of my “background” would do well in the Center of the Arts program. Baffled! I left his office upset, confused, and disappointed. His words resonated.

I am not the type of person to take no for an answer. The next two weeks of school, every other day I visited the Administrator to see if anyone had changed pathways, for a possibility for me to be reassigned. He tried discouraging me by saying, I was one of a hundred students seeking admittance into the International Studies program. I was driven, adamant, and finally spoke with the Director. My story moved her so much that she took a look at the roster and immediately added me to the program. I was overcome with happiness. I cried. She even sat there with me and helped create my new schedule, which now consisted of classes in civics, multicultural literature, Arabic, anthropology, biology, and comparative religion.

Walking through the new and unfamiliar hallway made me do a complete three-sixty. The halls were much quieter, and students appeared engaged and eager to learn. I surveyed my anthropology class, immediately noticing different ethnicities. As I was a new student, the teacher had the class introduce themselves and tell the origin of their family. I was completely amazed. There was a student who was born in the United States, but whose parents were Italian. Exactly what I wanted when I asked for a culturally diverse school and academic program. The course work initially threw me for a whirlwind, being very challenging and in depth. Classes once easy to me, such as literature, woke me up, as we were introduced to books of international authors, instead of typical American authors like William Faulkner. Assigned books were written by Yasunari Kawabata, from Japan, and Rajaa Alsanea, from Saudi Arabia.

Since then, the pathway system has dissolved, and students are allowed to take multiple classes from each pre-existing pathway. I am now a part of the International Baccalaureate Program, an elective curriculum and globally recognized program. As I look back to the beginning of my high school career, where I fought to be taken seriously, pleaded my case to a closed ear, and defied adversity, a few questions come to mind, such as, what type of person would I be today if I stayed in the Center for the Arts program? What type of educator profiles a student due to their background and discourages them? And the most important question, how could I not advocate against something I believed was so unjust and degrading, which was not being given a fair shake? I answer them by saying this: I do not have a crystal ball, so I would never know what type of person I would have been if I had stayed in the Center for the Arts program. In the hope that an educator who devotes his or her life's work to "helping students advance," he or she should never discourage any student not to strive for the better. He or she should also not define a student's work ethic, ability, and willingness to learn by the student's demographics.

As human beings, we are compelled to look deeper, beyond current situations, to broaden others in a world full of cultural experiences and knowledge. In the midst of adversity, I did what some may not do, or be able to do, and that is to advocate for oneself. Attending North Atlanta was a way to provide myself with an opportunity, a better education, and to interact with people of various cultures. Hearing the venomous words of discouragement only set in me a hunger to campaign harder. The International Studies Director saw my desire and believed in me, giving me the opportunity of a lifetime. The International Baccalaureate program has truly blessed me with numerous opportunities to achieve my career goal of becoming a Epidemiologist. I have attended Howard University's Summer Enrichment Medical Program, where I interned with a

professor of public health, became published on a medical manuscript, and created aspirin in a chemistry lab. I also attended and participated in the Women in STEM conference, meeting my mentor, who works at the Center of Disease Control as a Epidemiologist. These opportunities may have not presented themselves if I had accepted the Administrator's advice.

With that being said, I saw discrimination head on throughout my high school career. Minority students were discouraged to strive for greater, placed into groups based on assumptions and stereotypes, and just left in the shuffle of life. I believe that President Trump will do more of just that: categorize and assume, neglect, and tear down the confidence of Americans, out of ignorance, confirming their belief that the world has it out to get them. I want to affirm that that is not true. Everyone should have the right to the pursuit of happiness. Children should be able to dream big and without limitations. I have no fear, but I am aware of the times we are living in and what we are up against. This is the time our grandparents warned us about. It is a time to invest, save, and build wealth for your family and community in which you live. It is also a time to be more informed and not to take in all that the media has to say, and to do the research yourself. I have no fear for I know God will always prevail, and no man is greater than he.