

Elliott's IMPACT Year Reflection

My college search experience has been, by most American standards, unconventional. Specifically, when a young person decides to pursue a fifth year of high school, the immediate reaction of others is often negative. The assumption is that the young person must be deficient -- academically or emotionally unfit to assume the rite of passage of attending college. I readily admit I was not initially enthusiastic about the prospect of staying another year in high school while my friends and peers my age went off to college to further their studies and pursue their callings. However, now with the benefit of hindsight, I couldn't be more satisfied with the winding path I pursued and I hope my positive experience will encourage others to travel their unique path regardless of the pressures of the status quo.

My high school, [Pathways High](#), has a very unique key component of their real-world immersion model -- the IMPACT Year. This personalized fifth year of high school is intended to provide learners with a supported launch to adulthood. Due to the personalized design, I had a big hand in shaping the experiences of my year which, in turn, shaped me in ways I had not expected. These experiences ultimately put me in a stronger place to start college and subsequently face the world.

I am an actor and writer, so the Pathways High staff wanted to make sure I was nurturing those skills while also acquiring new ones and broadening my horizons. Together we made a plan that included both a production internship at First Stage in Milwaukee, a professional children's theater where I had been acting for more than ten years, and college coursework. The internship exposed me to new areas of the theater as well as those more familiar to me as an actor. I also took two courses at Milwaukee Area Technical College -- philosophy and concept development -- both of which interested me as a means to enrich my writing.

Once the year started, I hit the ground running. I earned A's in both courses. Philosophy, in particular, was fascinating to me and has already had a huge effect on my writing. During the first semester at First Stage, I worked in stage management, scenic design, administration, education, development, audition management, and performed as the understudy in "The Very Hungry Caterpillar." During this time, I began narrowing down where I was going to apply to college and my IMPACT Year experiences had a significant influence on my choices.

My original intent had been to audition for colleges as an actor. As I've always loved acting and already had multiple professional credits under my belt, it seemed the natural choice. However, I also had a deep affinity for writing, playwriting specifically, and wanted to pursue

that in some way as well. As I explored different theater arts career paths, I found that my true calling was creating and writing a story from the ground up and trusting the skill of the actors to carry out the essence of the piece effectively.

This new understanding of myself drastically changed how I applied to colleges. Instead of auditioning as an actor, I applied as an English major. In my applications, I wrote about the experiences I had writing and producing my play, "Finding the Suit," at Pathways High and how my writing affected my high school experience. I also found that sending some of my work to prospective colleges made me vastly more marketable. Because of my plays and the experiences I had outlined, I was a contender for roughly \$250,000 in scholarship money and was accepted at eight of the nine schools to which I applied. At every turn, I was finding that my unconventional high school experiences were not a weakness as I had previously thought, but were, in fact, my greatest strength. In the end, I selected Ohio University in Athens Ohio, where I will be double majoring in English and theater.

I'm especially proud of my final capstone project: a staged reading of one of my original plays, "Brawling, Boisterous, Scottish Wench," about a woman who defended her castle from a battalion of twenty thousand Englishmen during the second Scottish war for independence. I had been developing the play over the past five years. First Stage generously granted me access to actors in their high school training program, Young Company, and allowed me to use their theater space to mount the reading. Over the course of two weeks I had the responsibility of casting, directing the reading, and making revisions to the script as rehearsals progressed so the play would be in the strongest possible state. On May 16, 2019, the reading of my play was met with widespread praise from my peers and audience members as well as critiques, ideas, and different viewpoints that I could consider to develop the piece further. The experience not only shed light on some interesting writing opportunities for my play, but it also taught me that, though the vulnerability of showing my work to the world is scary, it is not only possible but highly gratifying and helpful to my writing process as a whole.

As a result of my IMPACT Year at Pathways High, I gained self-knowledge and greater clarity regarding the path I want to pursue. I was granted wonderful and unforgettable experiences I would not have had otherwise. During the time of my college search, I learned that my greatest strengths were the experiences and skills that made me different from others; that my love for writing stories and works of theater was the skill I wanted to study and eventually turn into a career; and that with dedication and hard work, I could achieve outcomes far greater than those which I thought I was capable.