You’re listening to CECI Connect, a podcast from the CECI Undergraduate Advising Office for the College of Education and Community Innovation at Grand Valley State University. Whether you’re a student, teacher, professional, or friend, welcome to this episode, Degree Planning: ***Finding your footing when stepping into the future***

Has anyone ever asked you “where do you see yourself in 5 years?”

It’s one of those classic icebreaker questions or interview questions I think I’ve heard a million times in my life. So many people have asked me. And folks seem to want to hear stuff like “oh! I see myself with a family, and my dream job, and maybe a beach house somewhere off a coast” blah blah blah. It’s a question for dreamers and planners and go-getters. And if I can be totally honest with you now, it’s one of my least favorite questions to answer.

Maybe you can tell by my tone, but I’m not a dreamer – I can’t remember a time I ever actually was. I’m more of a pragmatist – a down-to-earth realist who looks one foot ahead so I don’t trip, so you could say. I did like to play pretend when I was a kid; “Let’s pretend we live in a cabin” I’d say to my little sister. “We forage for berries and we have to make dinner before the sun goes down.” Lots of Little House on the Prairie content at my childhood home. I was good at imagining myself in another time, but I’d always go backward – prairie homes, castles, living in the wilderness. I didn’t really look far into the future that much, and I still don’t. Looking forward requires faith, hope, and confidence.

I may be a grown-up by all social metrics; but I still struggle with faith, hope, and confidence. Most days, the future scares me – I can’t see it, I don’t know what will happen along the way, and I struggle when heartbreak or disappointment cuts me off on my path. It’s not inspiring to say this, but I’ve experienced a lot of tragic chaos in my life – stuff that shows up with now obvious trail of “well, I did this so this happened next, now I’m stuck with this.” When surprise sadness or loss or diversion or roadblock thunks down in front of you often enough, it’s hard to feel safe committing to a plan that depends on consistent success and achievement. Thus far, I’ve just preferred making sure I know what’s happening around me and that I’m safe, happy, and content.

I mentioned a few episodes ago that my freshman year in college was the start of a great recession in American society – this was a time when daydreaming and planning sort of just ended up looking like “how do I become as nimble, adaptive, and amorphous as possible so I’m not confined to an industry or job that might cease to exist once I get there?” That sort of mentality doesn’t inspire a lot of hope and confidence (chuckle). When you don’t have much faith in the future, it’s hard to make a plan for it.

But I do like to know where I am – I observe everything around me. I like to know the rules of a room, the customs of a group of people, and the expectations of my participation. Some people call this introverted behavior – I wanna know what’s going on before I play. I want to know how to be prepared for my doctor’s appointment tomorrow. I want to know what to wear to my friend’s wedding in 6 months. And I want to know when I need to get the oil changed in my car before my engine croaks on me. All of these plans are things I crave and know how to handle. In order to make sure I feel safe, happy, and content, I don’t like to dream about 5 years from now; but I like to know what I need to do right now to be ok for tomorrow.

A sort of kin-activity to this drive I have to be okay “in the now” at the college level is knowing what classes I need to take – making sure that I’m following the rules or achieving something as I sign up for classes and pass them. It’s making sure I know what I’m doing now and that it’s setting me up alright for next year’s classes and that those classes set me up okay for the next year and so on.

In our academic advising office, we call this “degree planning”; academic advisors aim to help students make informed choices about degree and **graduation requirements**. That means we can help **clarify curriculum**, **course content**, and right-for-you **course sequences**. We also walk students through the many types of educational experiences they can have that make their college experience as rich and fulfilling as they want. These sorts of activities help students feel focused, grounded, and safe.

For instance, instead of thinking far out about your future and imagining what house you want, what city you want to live in, or what car you’re going to be driving, you can focus on which science class is best for you according to what your major requires and where your interests lie. I was an English major in college – I was responsible for taking A LOT of reading and writing classes, but I also had to finish the **general education requirements** at GVSU; so, I had to think about some other kinds of classes too. For me, honestly, I didn’t want to take a science class – I avidly avoided them when I could in high school. So, I decided to take two science classes that my advisor recommended to me as “you know, science classes for people who don’t like science that much.” I thought “perfect! That’s exactly who I am.”

And then when it came down to picking classes within my major – all those reading and writing classes – it was almost a challenge to figure out how to fit all the classes I wanted. I knew I couldn’t afford to take all the classes I wanted; I didn’t have the time or money for that. So my advisors would help talk to me about what my interests actually were so we could filter the courses out that didn’t match as much as others.

And when it came down to thinking about graduation, my advisor helped me imagine what final things I’d like to accomplish before I had to leave school, which brought us to a conversation about **studying abroad**. I had never traveled before and definitely hadn’t dreamed of traveling – it was expensive, unaffordable, and something rich people did…which I certainly never was. But my advisor talked to me about the tuition costs being the same as tuition at GVSU, the travel costs being covered by my financial aid, and that some programs are only 6 weeks long, so I can try traveling without risking severe homesickness, since it was my first time away from home. In order to pull off studying abroad in this way, I had to talk to my advisor about applying for financial aid, knowing what courses to sign up for in the system, and making sure that the classes I’d be taking overseas were still interesting and meaningful to me. And it was a thrilling plan to design.

Even now as I’m thinking about my days doing that, I realize that degree planning for me was a way my pragmatist-brain could handle hope – I get excited thinking about being able to design my life around stuff that matters to me. I feel inspired by the security of a plan for 6 months from now. In a way, degree planning was a way I could access feelings of hope, faith, and confidence in a manageable bite-sized way that felt achievable and within reach.

Whether you feel like a dreamer or a pragmatist, I think it’s safe to say that degree planning makes space for you – it’s an activity that can be as small as you need or as big as you want. For me, it was a “one to two years at a time” thing – which was perfect. Just enough planning to feel achievable and just enough looking down to feel like I could make it out okay. But just like every other way your advisor is here to help you, it’s supposed to be your way and to suit your needs.

For me, I needed safety. For you, you might need inspiration. Regardless, making a degree plan with your advisor will help you chart your own path and know what your next steps are to achieve your dreams. It might look like taking one step at a time – one foot in front of the other — but each step is one more step toward that distant future where we sometimes can’t picture ourselves five years from now.

If you would like supplementary information about how to talk to your academic advisor about your personalized degree planning process, check out the complementary blog post on our CECI advising website @ [www.gvsu.edu/ceciadvising](http://www.gvsu.edu/ceciadvising)

Thank you for listening. Our episode was hosted, written, and engineered by Melanie Rabine-Johnson, the Academic Resources and Retention Specialist for the CECI Undergraduate Advising Office at Grand Valley State University.