



## How People Learn Alumni Profiles **Derek Terrell**

**DEREK TERRELL:** My name is Derek Terrell and I currently serve as the Assistant Director of Undergraduate Admissions at Caltech. I graduated from HGSE in 2016 and I was a part of the higher education cohort.

Currently as an Assistant Director of Admissions, there are a lot of different things that I do. Obviously we read applications. That's a really big part of any job that you have in admissions. But aside from just reading applications, I actually focus on a lot of different things, such as professional development, so making sure that our staff, that we're constantly growing and that we're not just being an office that focuses on numbers alone, but that we're actually getting to dig deeper into our applications and learn about our students and learn about the student body that we want to bring in.

Aside from that, I also work as the Liaison for our Center for Diversity. As the Liaison for the Center for Diversity, I do work with them to make sure that we are looking at students from a variety of different backgrounds, because we want that present in our student body. And then I do a whole array of other things.

One of the biggest things that I do right now is I actually am the coordinator of our Counselor Advisory Board, so not just counselors that are admissions counselors, but counselors that actually are a part of CBOs, which are Community-Based Organizations, as well as high school counselors from both the public and private side. And we actually use them as a sounding board for us, so making sure that when we do release new essay questions, for example, that these questions aren't geared towards or only beneficial to a certain group of students. We want to make sure that it's very accessible to all students, so we use that as a sounding board for ourselves.

In addition to that, I actually coordinate Pre-Frosh Weekend, which is our largest admitted student event, which will be happening this spring actually. So, yeah. So as a coordinator for a Pre-Frosh Weekend, I make sure that the admitted student event goes well and have some oversight over the entire thing.

Education for me has always been something that I knew that I wanted to strive for or to attain because both of my parents-- my dad graduated from high school, my mom wasn't able to graduate from high school-- so that was always something that I knew was something that I had a lot of passion for.

However, I don't think I really considered education as a viable career option for myself until I

actually went off to college. I went to a small, private, liberal arts college in Michigan called Hope College. A very, very small, small town. But actually while I was there, it was really difficult for me. Once again, being a generation college student. The only student on the entire campus from Kentucky. So for me what I really found a lot of solace or a lot of support in was actually our Office of Multicultural Education.

And so as I was working with that office, I saw that, wow, there are actually jobs in which-- or careers-- that I could pursue that you were able to support students. And then I also started working with the admissions office there and I realized, wow, once again, there's another job that I can do in which I can help support students and where I can really focus on access for students who were similar to me-- first generation students who might not be from the area or who might be from other areas than the majority of the students on that particular campus. So that's when I really saw higher education, particularly admissions, as something that I could pursue as a career.

So after I'd been doing admissions consulting for almost five years, I actually received a Facebook message from a student, or it was a Facebook post on my wall. Basically a student that I had met almost five years prior was now going on to get his PhD. And he told me that it was really great and if it weren't for me that he wouldn't be where he was. Obviously, I knew that it really was because of him that he was there, but it was a really special feeling for me to think that I was able to help one student or that I had that impact on one student.

So as I thought about my own higher education, so going on to pursue a master's, and especially here here at HGSE, I wanted to be able to take that impact that I had on one student and to be able to scale it up and to actually have a larger impact on students, especially in the realm of higher education and higher education access.

I think there are a lot of different things that I learned as a student at HGSE. One of the most important things I think I learned though is how education is a much broader field than I had thought that it was before I had actually come in. I really was focusing a lot on how education for me focused on that access piece, that admissions piece, which is great. However, being able to take classes with students from all all different cohorts-- education policy and management, TIE, learning and teaching-- I was able to see that education really encompasses so much more.

And then it also helped me learn about the relationship that I have with others and how we might have the similar goal in education, but how we can approach it from very different ways and how are our perspectives, or our experiences and our perspectives actually help form the ways in which we decide to approach it or tackle any problems in education.

So I guess for me, I used to think learning was getting to a certain end, right? So that learning would end at some point. You would gain all of the knowledge and you would be there. You would be "learned", "learned", right?



Coming here and being around so many different people who have so many different experiences in education, I really realized that even if I am in a position where I've learned all of the basic skills and I have all of the abilities to do that job, there's still so much learning that goes into it, whether it be in the forms of training, workshops, professional development, where that learning is never going to truly stop. So I think that's what it is.

I think when I initially discovered that a lot of the professional development wasn't there is when I went to conferences and things that were posed as professional development and a lot of the stuff was very redundant and it's things that I had already heard before and yet it was not going in depth. So it was giving me all of the numbers and the figures, but it wasn't really breaking it down and saying what does that mean and how does that connect back to our profession, or how does that connect back to admissions professionals as we do our work and as we read students' applications, as we interact with students at high schools, as we talk to counselors, as we are connecting with community-based organizations, right?

So a lot of the words were there, but they weren't really telling people or teaching people how to take that back to your offices and really incorporate it into the work that we do. So I realized that was missing.

Also seeing the disconnect between admissions offices and, for example, centers for diversity or, you know, it's all very, very separate entities. At some of the schools that I've worked at too, the admissions office doesn't even operate in the same building, let alone under the same department head as other departments in which there's a lot of student engagement. So how can we truly know what kind of students we want at the school or how can we truly know what kind of student body we're trying to cultivate if we don't have a connection with the students nor do we have any training on what to look for?

I think that admissions counselors do have to be learning counselors, learning officers, because admissions is constantly changing. When we look at the admissions landscape, the students that are coming into our campuses, it's obvious that the student body is changing pretty rapidly. So as admissions counselors, you can't use the same metrics that you used 20 years ago. You can't even use the same metrics that you used five years ago. So when you're looking at a student and you're evaluating that student, the same, I guess, guidelines that were used even two years ago are kind of outdated.

I think we're seeing that a lot even in the institutions that I've actually worked at, whether it be on the admissions side or on the student affairs side, because we're having to think of different programming, right, focused around students identities that 10 years ago, there was no conversation about that identity at all, right? And now that's something that we have to do all the time and we really have to think about it.

I actually was just a session with a group of educators from K through 16 and I was the only one to stand up and introduce myself as my name is Derek Terrell. I work in undergraduate



admissions at Caltech and I used the pronouns he, him, his. And that was something that someone else came up to me afterwards and was like, wow, that's really great that you've decided to use that and I told him, oh, this is really commonplace in student affairs, particularly at my campus because we want to make sure that students feel included and we want to make sure that students feel very, very comfortable and that nobody calls a student outside of their gender pronouns. So that's how I definitely see higher ed and admissions has to grow and change as our student body continues to grow and change as well.

Learning is at the heart of what I do because I feel that admissions counselors really are learners and we have to continue learning, because we're the ones who are shaping the classes that are going to be coming onto our campuses, right? We're the ones who are really able to read the application and see what the students are doing, see the passions that they bring and being able to make, to being able to see what the student gives us and translate that into, I guess, a good community that we want to cultivate.

So I definitely see admissions counselors as learners and I see my job as a learner and as an educator, so for me as I continue to learn, I need to continue to then educate other admissions folks too about how we can continue this work.

I see myself impacting people's learning and growth and I think before I was focused more on just students, but now as I see my career going further, I see myself becoming, not just an admissions counselor, but now I'm an assistant director and I'll keep on moving up.

I see myself as having the responsibility to educate other admissions professionals, specifically young admissions professionals or new admissions counselors, because there are a lot of things that I didn't know as a first year admissions counselor and that nobody really ever taught me. I kind of had to learn it along the way. I definitely think coming here to HGSE gave me a little more of that knowledge, but, yeah, I see it as my calling and I guess my goal is to continue teaching so that admissions counselors will be better admissions counselors and think of equity in a totally different way.

So I definitely think prior to coming to HGSE, I thought a lot about equity as equality. I thought we have to give everyone these exact same opportunities and that's the way that everything is going to be great. If everyone has the same opportunity, then everyone should be able to achieve and do well.

I know that that's not the case and I knew that wasn't the case, but I think really coming to HGSE, taking the courses and engaging in really great discussion around critical race theory, around ethnic studies, all sorts of those things, really gave me, I guess, the vocabulary to discuss and to know what equity really was and to see how it was my responsibility as an educator, as a professional in admissions, to make sure that equity is carried out through, not just the admissions process, but throughout education as a whole.

I really do think that education is a social justice issue. There's no ifs, ands, or buts about that. Because we see what the lack of education and the lack of opportunities or the lack of high quality education, how that impacts different student populations in very different ways, right? And so I just can't even imagine anyone saying that it's not a social justice issue.

And the reason why I'm thinking about this now is because a little student, an eighth grader, sent me an email very recently. He was from the Santa Ana Public School System and he asked me about affirmative action. And he asked me about, I guess, how I view affirmative action, if I think we should use affirmative action, if we should only focus on race and affirmative action or if we should focus on socioeconomic status. And this is coming from an eighth grader, which was deep, right, thinking that these are questions that I never asked myself at all when I was in elementary school, middle school, probably not even high school.

But then really, really thinking that students are thinking about these things because because education is a social justice issues, so we're seeing even eighth graders-- babies-- who are asking about how race should be included in admissions, how socioeconomic status should be included in admissions, so it's very, very obvious that education is a social justice tool. It's a social justice issue, but I really think it's a social justice tool, so I see empowering or, you know, empowering students with education, with knowledge, is a way, is a form of social justice liberation, really.

So as I think about the professional development that's needed by people in higher education, specifically people in admissions, I really think about some of the things that I learned about cultural competency, so through ethnic studies, through critical race theory. And then kind of coupled into higher education, or thinking about human resources and training and sort of development tools that are there, so really combining those two.

So teaching admissions professionals how to read applications even with a sense of cultural sensitivity and cultural competency, which is not something that you can do by just telling a 21-22-year-old student, hey, read this application and make sure that you're being culturally competent, right. It actually has to be something that you break down for them and you have to think about the implicit biases that they have and I think that's one of the biggest pieces that's missing and needs to be a part of the training for admissions professionals.

I would say the best piece of advice I could give to any student coming to HGSE would be don't stay just within your cohort. There are courses out there as a Harvard student, you can take courses across HGSE, across campus. Feel free to explore. Obviously, take the requirements required of your particular master's program, but there's so much more to learn in education and there are so many great perspectives that you'll get if you decide to branch out a little bit more.

I don't think I would be where I am now or have some of the skills or some of the knowledge or some of the tools that I have had I not decided to branch out a bit, so that's probably my



biggest piece of advice for any incoming HGSE student.

So one of the things that I learned about while at HGSE is the importance of safe spaces and how students need to be able to feel safe in order to learn. So even in the work that I'm doing right now, working as a liaison for our Center for Diversity, that's something that I'm able to take into the realm of higher ed and really talk about that and even for us while we read applications, if we know that a student discloses something to us about their gender identity or their sexual identity, that's something that when we see them on campus we can't just go ahead and, you know, reveal, especially if they're with their parents or with a school, right? So--