

In what ways are community college students making decisions about their academic majors and/or potential careers?

- **In what ways are students' intersecting identities relevant to their academic majors/ careers decision-making process?**
- **What is the role of family, friends, and institutional agents (primarily faculty) in this process?**

Ryan Lewis

Natacha: In what ways do you think academic majors are connected to the careers, jobs, people eventually have?

Ryan: See, I thought they were directly tied but my teacher, Mr. Shapiro, shed some light on ... Shed some light on how they're really not. Shapiro is comedy. He'll be like, "Don't go to school, why are you here?" Hashtag his personality.

Natacha: You think he really means that?

Ryan: He really means it. He's preaching it. He's right, a lot of people go in their majors and they get their prerequisites and they go out into the world and what we tell our kids is that you do that and then you go out to the place and you're going to get a job, and that doesn't happen for hundreds of people. They just don't. And then they end up moping around and doing the same thing as people that wouldn't. I'm not saying that's going to happen to me, or the people here. I don't know. But the fact that it still does happen to hundreds is a big problem. It's just a big problem with the way the system works. I'm not the person to ask on how to fix that, but... So, sometimes it's directly tied. Sometimes it's loosely tied, sometimes you start meeting people and you end up doing something completely different. And then sometimes, you do it and you know exactly what you want to do and you do it great, you still can't get out there... All types of bias, stereotypes, bullshit, racism, sexism, heights, age, needing to go through a specific requirements.

Ryan is a 19-year-old, first-year student at PCC pursuing an English major on account that there is no creative writing program at the college. When I met Ryan, he was sitting in the quad rapping out-loud and fairly warned me that if I sat by him, I would have to listen to his raps. When I initially asked him to describe himself, he exclaimed I am the **"Anime Rap God"**. He then began to express his love for all things animation and nerd rap. Ryan admittedly seeks alternative realities because, in his own words: **"I don't think I've ever been content with the world."** Throughout our time talking, Ryan often discussed his detachment from society, his family, even his own racial identity. At the same time, his openness and desire for connection were palpable. Throughout the time we spent together, Ryan said hi to about five different people and even happily discussed his relationship to one faculty member who made him feel **"like he cared."** Ryan candid descriptions of his thoughts and his attempts to find a place in society while he grapples with some genuine personal obstacles illustrate the need for very close mentoring and guidance.

Ryan first enrolled at PCC because his family could not afford to send him to the university he got accepted into. Ryan explains, "I wanted to go to Seattle Pacific University. My mom and I visited there, I was already been accepted. That's where I'm headed. But, I just don't- We don't have the funds. Even with financial aid and with everything, it would fit for a year. So then, what about the rest of the years? So, I figured I would just come to a Community College that was near, that I could get to. But, I didn't want to go to Citrus, because that's where all the Duarte people go to and I'm just tired of seeing them". For Ryan going to a community college represents an excellent opportunity to try out a school for basically free. Unlike other students, Ryan is very sure of what he wants to do professionally and has not engaged in any program exploration. Ryan says, **"I want to be a creative director."** I had to do a lot of research because I've always been an idea, man. I've always been the dude that like, **"Oh, so this anime fighting game came out and I love all the characters and the concept, but the gameplay is trash. So what if we took that and took this and then we made it actually godlike... I want to be the idea dude. For games, movies, anime, anything. The title was called a creative director. To be a creative director you have to major in creative writing and because they don't have that here I have to major in English to transfer to creative writing."**

Ryan is very sure of the subjects and things he is not interested in studying. Ryan enjoys college because, unlike his K-12 education, he feels that the college environment is respectful of people and their interests. Ryan says that he loves the freedom of not having to take subjects like math and history. In terms of math, Ryan told me that he has a type of learning disability "concept imagery that makes it particularly difficult to learn. He says, **"I'm great at math, well I was at least, but it tires my brain so much. It's such a strenuous work. I've never enjoyed doing the problems, and word problems are the death of me. I've never understood or been able to comprehend them. Like, explaining things is so much harder for me...I had a thing called concept imagery deficit growing up, which is when you receive information your brain makes images. Mine didn't. So you would tell me this is a chair, and I'd be like okay, cool. And then you would tell me this is a chair and it had wheels, and I'm like no it's not, what do you mean? Like, I would think it was a completely different thing. It made no sense to me"**.

When discussing why he doesn't like history, Ryan elaborates, **"History I knew wasn't the fucking path. I've never liked the history of actual things. Didn't want to learn about George Washington or any of the presidents. Like, you would talk to me and I would just feel my energy drain in my body... I was never into black culture. I know about it now because I had to growing up, learning about it, and you know, it's the right thing to do. But no. I hated hearing about slavery. I mean, I think everybody does."** Beyond his issues with the history of slavery, it seems like Ryan also struggles with the idea of blackness. Ryan is vocal about his lack of connection to black people even though he identifies as black and Cherokee and the fact that he describes both of his adoptive parents as black. Ryan explains: **"Culture background has never interested me. Like, I don't like the main black stereotypes. I've mostly never been attracted to black females, black women. Even, like, really brilliant ones because I just don't like the stereotype of how we act. Like, how we're raised up to be is very aggressive most of the time. I don't know, like, I say nigga all the time and we toss around hate at each other, that's how we play with each other. I've never been into it."**

Besides speaking with a counselor at SPU, Ryan has not spoken to a counselor or staff member at PCC that could guide him in his professional journey or even help him navigate the difficulties he has encountered in his courses. Ryan is open about struggling academically during his first and second semesters. He attributes his struggles to his learning disability. When I asked him if he has sought out any resources at the college to help him with learning disabilities, he quickly said, **"No. I don't like telling**

most people about it because it just causes problems and it's boxing myself, you know?... I don't want no special ed shits”.

However, there has been a faculty member who has made a world of difference in Ryan’s experience at PCC. Prof. Shapiro, for Ryan, has been the perfect mix of someone who has been honest and caring at the same time. When Ryan first entered Prof. Shapiro’s class, he really did not like it and even told his mom that he was going to drop it because the way the professor taught, **“hurt his brain.”** At the suggestion of his mother, Ryan did not withdraw from the class. But what really helped him was Professor Shapiro personally reaching out to him. Ryan explains, **“Shapiro is an amazing teacher if you're trying to learn how to write perfect... He's completely honest, he's just brutally blunt with everything he says and states. He also wants us to be. He gives it as a completely free environment, which is a breath of fresh air. He has a nonchalant non-caringness, but he does care. He will pull you aside and say hey what's going on....”** And Professor Shapiro did just that with Ryan. Ryan admittedly was not doing his work in Professor Shapiro’s class until Shapiro pulled him aside. Ryan describes it as **“I was failing the class and not doing work, and he pulled me to the side and was like, “Ayo, you should do the work.” And I was like nah, chief. And he was like, “You should really do the work, are you doing well in your other classes?” I was like, “Yeah.” He was like, “Why are you not doing my work?” Then we just talked about it and how the simple and directness was very hard for me, how that's not how my brain works, and concept imagery was giving me problems when I try to write in the manner he wanted me to. We just talked... And he really listened and cares and he does that with everybody in the class. Like, you could be talking about literally anything and he intently listens, it's not just like, “Uh-huh, okay.” It's like he's hearing and he's feeling what you're saying, you know?”** Although this good experience with Shapiro has helped Ryan do better in that class, he still admits that he is failing most of his other courses this semester.

When I asked Ryan if he plans to transfer to SPU after PCC, he says, **“I am going to the Navy, so that changes everything.”** Ryan had mentioned his parents had been suggesting that he pursued the military **“from birth,”** but during our conversation, he had discussed his desire to be a creative director. So when I asked him where did his aspirations to be a creative director fit in his plans of going to the Navy, he explained, **“I need to get out of my family situation. And a lot of other things. And I want to grow as a person, and I need to force myself into a situation I don't want to go into. I'm not excited about it. But I know that my brain is good for that and I would work well, it's very black and white, straightforward. I also want to buff up. They're literally paying me to buff up. Hella benefits, Navy specifically because they travel... The more I focus, the quicker it just happens. I don't want to retake any classes, you know. So, of course. But I'm way behind. We only got, what, four weeks left of school? And I have lots to do to catch up. And it doesn't help when I'm just sitting and rapping for hours. I left my backpack at home, and it's an hour commute, so. Like, I can't do anything today.”**