

By **Brittany L. Forte**

Finding peace with pencil

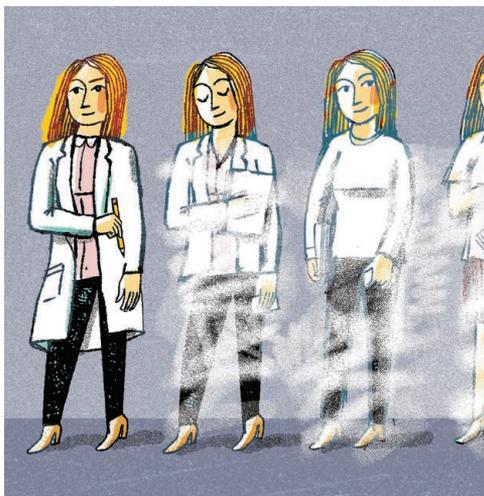
I reached for my favorite black pen, eager to begin my annual career development plan—three pages of boxes and lines detailing my vision of what lies ahead after I graduate with a Ph.D. Each of the previous 3 years, I had confidently completed the form in pen. But as I prepared to fill out the form for the fourth time, I hesitated. I had changed during graduate school, and I had to ask myself, “Can I be sure I will stick to the plan?” Having a clear path had offered such reassurance as I worked through the highs and lows of grad school. But this time, I decided, I would set aside the pen and complete the plan in pencil.

My fixation on planning began as a high school freshman. My principal gave an inspirational speech about the importance of a 5-year plan, and I was sold. Once I created my plan, the rest would be easy—I just had to stick to the straight and narrow path I had set for myself. In permanent ink, my 14-year-old self wrote that I would channel my passion for science into a career as a pharmacist. I signed the document and confidently submitted it to my homeroom teacher, who promised to return it to me on the final day of senior year.

Four winding years later, I was horrified to open the envelope. I still loved science, but I had discovered a passion for doing research and now envisioned a future in the lab. Embarrassed that my plans had changed and unsettled by learning that the path to satisfaction was not as clear as I had hoped, I ripped up my 5-year plan and buried the pieces in the trash. I promised myself I would not make such a mistake again. The next time I made a plan, I would execute it flawlessly.

Each of my first 2 years as an undergraduate, I recorded my progress against a new plan: After finishing my bachelor’s degree, I would enroll as a Ph.D. student in the same pharmacology lab where I was already conducting research. I completed my annual progress report—in pen. Then, I discussed it with my faculty mentor, and we both signed it in permanent ink. Having a detailed blueprint, verified by a mentor I looked up to, made me feel secure in my future.

I was hesitant to change my life’s blueprint yet again. But as I prepared to fill out my annual progress report with my favorite black pen for the third and final time



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as an undergrad, just 9 months before graduation, I realized that I wanted to broaden my horizons. I still hoped to get a Ph.D.—but in basic biology instead of pharmacology.

To my surprise, my faculty mentor praised me for realizing that it was time to make a change, as opposed to blindly sticking to my earlier path. But he insisted that I be precise about my new direction: What would I study, and in which lab?

I eagerly devised a new plan. I was comfortable giving up plan A—but if I was going to switch to plan B, it needed to be as clear and detailed as before.

Today, though, in the fourth year of my Ph.D. program, I don’t have a plan A or even a firm plan B. I filled out my most recent career

development plan in pencil, smudged it by erasing and changing entries, and left a number of boxes blank. I may yet pursue an academic career, as I had written with such confidence in previous years. Perhaps I will become a scientific editor. Or maybe I will end up going some other direction I haven’t yet considered.

To be entirely honest, not knowing what my future holds is a little uncomfortable. It is hard to give up knowing—or thinking I know—exactly what I want to do and how I will get there. But I’m grateful to have room to grow and develop in unexpected directions. So my new mantra is “be flexible, embrace change and uncertainty—and always write in pencil.” ■

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