

UNDERSTANDING THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE THROUGH THE LOSS/MOMENTUM FRAMEWORK:

Clearing the Path to Completion

SARAH'S STORY



Two years after Sarah graduates from high school, she applies to her local community college. Sarah cannot wait to start this next phase of her life; finally, she is getting the chance to take the classes she likes and will become more independent. Knowing that college will be a stretch financially and that her part-time job just covers her living expenses, she immediately registers for a financial aid workshop. At the workshop, she hears that meeting with an academic counselor could help her figure out the right classes to take. She sets up an appointment and while she is on campus, she takes her placement test (even though she hasn't had time to study).

At her counseling session, Sarah finds out that she is not quite “college-ready” (she is not sure what that even means!) and needs to take developmental education courses. Even worse, she is confused—how can she be placed in Introductory Algebra when she passed high school algebra years ago? On top of this news, the counselor wants her to choose a major and create an educational plan, but Sarah has no idea what she wants to study, let alone what she wants to do with the rest of her life. She takes a deep breath, follows the counselor's advice to join a learning community and picks a smattering of other classes that seem interesting.

Over the next three years, Sarah struggles to stay motivated. The money from financial aid is not enough for her to pay for her education and her escalating rent, so she takes another job that eats up much of her time and energy, requiring her to reduce her course load to part-time. She tries to keep in touch with the counselor and stick to her educational plan, but there are only so many hours in the day. The semester is challenging, but Sarah manages to pass her courses. She is determined to finish what she started and earn her bachelor's degree and chooses healthcare as her career path.

Reinvigorated, Sarah makes an appointment with her counselor to redo her educational plan. Unfortunately, many of the classes she has taken so far do not count towards a degree in her program, and some of the new classes she needs are full. To make things worse, a course that is key to her progress in her program is not being offered that semester. To speed things along, she concurrently enrolls at another college nearby; this helps her meet her requirements, but juggling two colleges with different systems and approaches to teaching can get confusing. Feeling overwhelmed and defeated, she wonders if she should just drop the whole idea of college—at this rate, she feels as though she'll never graduate.

Sarah takes another deep breath and decides to keep on going. She reduces her work hours and enrolls in a summer session. After nearly six years in college, Sarah sees the finish line approaching. Soon she will have enough credits to transfer to the nearby four-year college, though she will not get her associate's degree. Having waited this long, and seeing no real value in spending more time just to get a credential that is not her end goal, Sarah transfers. More than anything she is ready to just move on to the next step in her life. Surely once she gets to the university, this will all be a lot easier . . .

right?