



# Life After Williams



A Winter Study course challenges students to approach their future careers from the perspective of the kind of life they seek.

By Jim Mulvihill

Illustration by Shannon Brady

**A**s head of All Campus Entertainment, responsible for planning student parties and concerts, Sarah Jenks '07 thought she had her future mapped out. Her experience at Williams would help land her a job in event promotions. And, if she worked hard, perhaps she could coordinate galas with exclusive guest lists, earning huge commissions while catering to the rich and famous.

"I wanted to graduate having the most and best event-planning experience of any female in the country so I could just go to New York and make it happen," she says.

Jenks was well on her way to realizing that dream, especially after nabbing a prestigious internship allowing her to work on high-profile happenings in the Big Apple. There was only one problem—the job was in no way what she had envisioned.

"I didn't like event planning in the real world because it didn't involve the community building that my work here with students did," she says. "I realized it just wasn't what I wanted to do, and that's when I really started freaking out."

Suffice it to say, people who hope to make a living arranging every detail of life down to whether the ice will be crushed or cubed don't typically welcome unforeseen occurrences, especially a major existential crisis. So, Jenks says, she was eager to "find some guidance."

She found it in "Composing a Life: Finding Success and Balance in Life After Williams," a Winter Study course that since 1996 has asked students to

approach their future careers from the perspective of the kind of life they seek. In the end, it's as much about posing questions as it is about finding answers.

"I thought it was going to be about choosing a career, which it was, but it was more about choosing a career that's going to fit your life," Jenks says. "We talked a lot about balancing career and family. What I took out of it immediately is that I don't have to choose what I want to do right away and get into it the moment I graduate. It really helped me feel like my life is more flexible, that I have more choices."

"Composing a Life" is the brainchild of Chip and Michele Moeller Chandler, both Class of 1972, who designed the course around lessons learned in their own lives. Michele has a master's degree from Columbia, a PhD from Northwestern and experience working in college administration. Chip has an MBA from Harvard, spent 25 years at McKinsey & Co. and this year was named a visiting professor of leadership studies at Williams.

In 1996, Chip took a sabbatical from his high-powered corporate job in Chicago so the family could move to Williamstown for a break from suburban life. When an opportunity to transfer to London arose, the Chandlers' eighth-grade son and third-grade daughter balked at the idea.

Michele recalls, "On the way back from visiting London, our son said, 'Well, that's an exciting city, but why would you move because you think you might love a place when you've already found a place you're in love with?'"

Michele was dealing with a medical issue at the time and discovered that she, too, found the quiet life more agreeable. What started as a temporary respite in the bucolic Berkshires ended up a permanent relocation.

"All of those factors led us to say, 'Life is short. Yes, it's very important to have a fulfilling, satisfying professional life. But it's also important to have a fulfilling, satisfying personal life,'" Chip says. "There has to be a balance, and staying was one of several steps along the way toward trying to find that for ourselves."

Chip arranged to work out of McKinsey's Boston office, returning home on weekends.

When the Chandlers first arrived in Williamstown, then College President Harry C. Payne suggested they get reacquainted with their alma mater by teaching a Winter Study

course. Chip and Michele relished the opportunity to lead a meaningful discourse with students on where they were going. Michele had completed her dissertation at Northwestern on professional women who sacrificed career advancement to have children. She found that many women in management, law, academia and medicine had never been briefed on what life had in store for them beyond their professional duties.

“We were educated in the ’70s and had been taught that we could have it all,” Michele says. “All these women had wonderful careers but found out they couldn’t hack it for a host of reasons. There was a common lament that nobody had told us in college that we would have all these challenges.”

Determined to help prepare a new generation for the struggles they knew were common among well-educated, family-oriented couples, the Chandlers created a course that evolved into a “Generation Y” journey of self-discovery tailored for Williams students, who often are so focused on academic and professional achievement that they might neglect to fully consider how personal life will fit in.

“The heart of a liberal arts education is learning to lead an examined life, and that’s what this course is really about at its core,” Chip says. “You learn to be thoughtful about everything, from how you define success to what your priorities are to how you at least begin to think about making trade-offs. Once we graduate, we all make trade-offs.”

The course title, “Composing a Life,” is borrowed from anthropologist Mary Catherine Bateson’s book profiling five women who improvise successful and fulfilling lives despite the endless demands placed upon them. “Composing” implies that living life is a skill honed through study, practice and refinement.

This idea is emphasized in the structure of the course. Case studies, guest lecturers and assigned readings give students the opportunity to scrutinize other people’s lives, so they might be better prepared to make life-altering decisions of their own.



One point constantly reinforced, however, is that solutions don’t necessarily come easily. “We have no aspirations to give students the answers,” Chip says. “There are no right answers, but there are right questions.”

Take, for example, “The Case of Kim and Eric,” one of the more challenging conundrums posed to the class each January. It’s fictional but one that could be based on thousands of real-life couples. Eric and Kim are Williams graduates, alumni of top graduate schools in their respective fields and rising stars in their professions in New York City. Once they decide to have children, Kim agrees to move to Boston so Eric can work for a prestigious law firm while she raises the baby. Several years later, however, Kim decides she’s ready to return to the workforce and gets a juicy offer in Chicago. By this time, Eric has almost made partner at his firm and doesn’t want to leave Boston, but Kim feels it’s her turn to have the career she wants.

Students are asked to identify the key “decision factors” for the couple “by applying the same analytical skills they would apply to any other course at Williams,” Chip says.

The class is split into two groups, one representing Kim and the other, Eric, to form arguments. Each group then presents its recommendations. Some years the class is overwhelmingly in favor of Eric’s run at becoming partner in Boston, while other years they favor Kim pursuing her career in Chicago.

“What typically comes out is it’s a lot more complicated than it first appears,” Chip says. “There are a lot of decision factors that you can actually be quite objective about. You can’t make this a completely objective analytical exercise, but there’s a whole lot more objectivity and analysis that’s possible than when you first look at it.”

In addition to preparing students for tackling tricky scenarios, the cases can also have the effect of helping them to avoid such decisions in the first place. For example, a student who knows he someday wants ample free time to spend with his children needs to be aware that certain careers are more conducive to such an arrangement.

“Does that mean that if you want a family life you can’t be in medicine?” Chip asks. “No, but you may want to think about whether you want to be a cardiovascular surgeon, with the kind of lifestyle that it brings, or if you want to do something like radiology that might have a more controllable and predictable lifestyle.”

Ideally, students realize that college is not only the time to prepare for a career but also for life. “If you keep doing these exercises with different cases, all of a sudden they see that these life choices, up to a point, can be subjected to a framework,” Chip says.

Matt Libbey ’98, a former investment banker making a transition into management consulting, took “Composing a Life” as a senior. Six years later, as an MBA candidate at Dartmouth’s Tuck School of Business, he was assigned a case identical to one the Chandlers presented in his final Winter Study course. It turns out the intervening years between



Williams and business school made all the difference in Libbey's reasoning.

In "The Part-time Partner," students debate who should be named the next partner at a successful law firm. The choice is between a woman who works part time but brings in the most business and a man who has been diligent as a full-time employee but without as much success.

"When I was an undergrad, I would have given it to the man," Libbey says. "My feeling then was you couldn't make partner someone who hadn't put in the requisite number of years and time. But after six years out in the working world and getting married and having this different perspective on life, you realize that you get points for showing up, but results are what you should be rewarded for."

Now Libbey is doing his part to help students look into their own futures. For the last two years, he and his wife, Garet (Asbury) Libbey '97, have returned to Williams to share their experiences with the Chandlers' class. "It's amazing for us to see that kids are asking the same kinds of questions that we asked when we were seniors in college," Libbey says. "We feel a lot younger than we would have seemed to ourselves back then."

The Libbeys emphasize the importance of flexibility in the real world. They also encourage young people to let go of the need to judge themselves against their peers. It's a habit that's easy to fall into as a student, Libbey explains, when grade point averages and awards make it simple to do so. "Once you get out of college, it's not like that anymore," he says. "You're comparing yourself to other people's successes when everyone has different trajectories and different things they're interested in getting out of life."

Thanks to "Composing a Life," Libbey says he felt better prepared when the competing demands of professional and personal life snuck up on him. "You think about some of these things [in college], but they seem so far off," he says. "It turned out I had to deal with many of these issues within my first two or three years out of college, and I was really glad I had thought about them before they happened."

Case studies and lectures are further supported by readings that run the gamut from wry contemporary philosopher Alain de Botton (*The Consolations of Philosophy*) to popular *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman (*The World is Flat*) to best-selling author Peggy Orenstein (*Flux: Women on Sex, Work, Kids, Love, and Life in a Half-Changed World*), not to mention past convocation addresses by Toby Cosgrove '62 and Glenn Lowry '76. The unique, Williams-specific flavor of "Composing a Life" is reflected in an assignment requiring students to peruse class notes from past Williams alumni magazines and circle lives they find appealing. Students then are asked to consider what appeals to them about these people, what the common aspects of their lives are and what can be learned from their stories.

The Chandlers also like to remind students that for most people the opportunity to change careers, cut back hours or relocate to a better place can be seen as a luxury, not a quandary. "We try to reassure them that while having all these choices

might be a problem on some level, this is a high-class problem," Chip says.

The course concludes with a 10-page paper based on field interviews with adults of the students' choosing as well as their own reflections on the course. Some talk to their own parents, while others reach out to friends, professors, mentors or community leaders.

In January, the Chandlers led "Composing a Life" into its second decade of helping students plot the journey of adulthood that begins at Williams. "The kids have been equally ambitious all 10 years," Chip says. "What they've been ambitious about has changed, and it's a reflection of the economy and culture of the time."

One year, he recalls, during the Internet boom, a sophomore told the Chandlers, "I'm sorry I can't make it to class on Friday because I have to meet with my venture capitalist."

"Then the bubble burst," Chip says, "and a number of them looked at the job market and did more adventurous things. They were proactively giving themselves a chance to travel or go into the Peace Corps or Teach for America."

Whatever the next stage of life holds for them, be it event planning or backpacking or investment banking, the bigger questions of life and how to live it remain essentially the same.

"What they learn is that they have to come face to face with their values," Michele says. "Your life, hopefully, is yours to do with what you wish. We know you can't plan everything, but you can be thoughtful about the choices you're making and make them with conviction. These are lessons that are timeless." ■

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