

*PhD Cross-Cultural and Industrial/Organizational Psychology, Queen's 1994*  
*MSc Industrial Organization Psychology, Calgary 1991*  
*BAH Psychology, Calgary 1989*

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*In her own words: "Committed to the pursuit of social justice for all peoples and the dismantling of systemic discrimination and racism."*

Valerie Pruegger has never been one to accept the status quo. "My mother says I came out of the womb waving a big stick and challenging all that I saw around me," she jokes. Her longtime dedication to social, political and economic justice and equity for all attests to her strong will and determination.

Before heading off to university as a mature student, Valerie worked for ten years for the municipal government of Calgary in a variety of roles. There, working with people struggling with all kinds of discrimination, she dedicated herself, both personally and professionally, to the principles of the civil rights and feminist movements.

Fascinated by the inequities in society, she enrolled at the University of Calgary in 1985, majoring in psychology. She earned an Honours degree under the direction of Dr. Tim Rogers, a psychology professor and mentor, who urged her to take on graduate studies. She did, earning an M.Sc. in psychology in 1990.

Valerie then faced a decision: Should she tackle her Ph.D. at Queen's or McGill University? She chose the former for the

opportunity of working with Dr. John Berry, a pioneer in the field of cross-cultural psychology. She also felt that Kingston was better suited to her lifestyle and that of her beloved dog!

But once immersed in academia, she began to doubt her direction in life. "In addition to difficulties I experienced in my program, I was incredibly homesick." As a result, she plunged into her work and finished her degree in an astonishing two and a half years. "It was a very painful degree. The process was difficult and I didn't feel as though my theoretical or methodological perspective was met with academic openness."

Her academic hiatus ended with a return to Alberta and the start of frustrating job search. "I realized just how 'anti-credential' the province really can be. I honestly believe that I have had doors closed because I have a Ph.D." In fact, sometimes maintaining good interpersonal relations means skipping any mention of her title altogether. "Introducing myself as Ms. instead of Dr. can drastically reduce the possibility of being written off as a stuffy academic. It can also reduce the perception of power imbalances and help build trust. In community-based work, it's important not to invite anything into the equation that might be intimidating."

Re-entering the world of work after an absence of ten years was also problematic

because the networks Valerie had developed were “all blown due to [her] absence and the work just wasn’t there.” Add to the situation a high rate of unemployment in the province, and it is no surprise that Valerie ended up working as a clerk out of a temporary employment agency. “I did some teaching at University of Calgary, but I didn’t want to enter academia full-time. When I conduct research and publish information, I want it to be with and for the people who really need to be helped.”

Along with checking the newspapers for job ads, Valerie joined a provincially-sponsored work program for those with advanced academic degrees. The program created a network of people who notified each other of job openings in their fields. Thanks to this initiative, Valerie landed a position as the Executive Director of the Calgary Multicultural Centre. “The job allowed me to establish contacts with a variety of people working in the field and members of ethno-cultural groups. The pay was pathetic and the hours were long, but in my two years there I once again found my place in this city.”

From the Multicultural Centre, she moved into a position with the municipal government as a Research Social Planner. Today, her research addresses social issues such as homelessness, racism and domestic violence, and it is the basis for recommendations to the city about dealing with these problems. She works in a variety of sectors — including health, justice and education — conducting anti-racism training and facilitating diversity organizational change processes. The work is satisfying, but working in an often-immovable bureaucracy has its frustrations.

“Negotiating the politics of the workplace while balancing the needs of the community is quite challenging,” she observes.

Reflecting on her own career path, Valerie strongly advocates planning ahead. While she recognizes how vital education is in today’s society, she questions the need for everyone to push as far as she did. “Depending on the field, unless you’re heading for academia or work as a clinical psychologist, a Ph.D. could hinder your chances. Be sure you understand the organizational sub-culture in which you want to work.”

However, she is a big booster of continuing education. “Entering university as a mature student definitely has its advantages. My real-world experience allowed me to bring valuable information and concepts into the classroom.”

She urges students to continually broaden their interests while still in school. For instance, her elective study of Aboriginal law at Queen’s has proved

invaluable in her work with Aboriginal communities in Calgary. “Most of my work requires a strong grounding in many disciplines, including history, political science, social work and more. I read in all of these subjects all the time to keep up.”

Her best advice to new graduates? “Create your own opportunities by adjusting the job to fit your needs. Know what these are and negotiate with your employer to attain them. That ensures the best outcome for all.” ❖

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