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Living Monuments: Method to the madness

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For those of us who want to serve, options must
at some point give way to choices.

Method to the madness

Five years ago, I knew what I wanted to do with my life.

I had to know. To apply for the Truman Scholarship, you must, while a junior in college, devise, detail and defend a master plan for your future life of public service. Beginning with a description of the graduate degree you plan to acquire and the school at which you plan to study, and ending with your loftiest career goals, the application forces you to think through your future in immense detail.

In addition, the application's final and 15th question is a maddeningly vague request to tell the committee anything else that you feel is relevant — as if a year-by-year plan for the next quarter century of your life isn't enough!

The application process struck me as amazingly silly. As careful as we applicants had been in preparing our proposed career paths — and Furman ensures that its Truman applicants are *very* careful — I was certain that none of us would follow through to the letter. We were, after all, 20 years old. Moreover, when I joined my fellow scholars for a weeklong conference in the spring of 2001, the staff of the Truman Foundation told us that they *expected* us to deviate significantly from our plans. In fact, the primary focus of the foundation's post-selection support program is helping scholars revise, and often even fully rewrite, their career aspirations.

I received this news with some level of resentment. The application process had been difficult, and I hated to think that it was an exercise in futility.

Once I got to law school, I began to see the genius of the Truman process.

When I arrived at Yale, I entered a world of blisteringly smart 20-something Ivy Leaguers in perpetual pursuit of — well, it's not really clear. Almost all of my classmates say that they want to engage in public service at some point in their lives. But for now, the mantra of the modern, elite 20-something is, "I'm keeping my options open."

Why go to law school? Lots of options. Why be on law review? Options. Why clerk for a judge afterwards? Options. Why go to a large private firm after clerking? Options, options, options. The great contradiction is that the alleged path to all of these options, whatever they may be, contains no options whatsoever. In fact, it's utterly prescribed.

There is, of course, more than a little wisdom in keeping one's options open. The problem comes

when the maintenance of options becomes an end in itself and, thereby, a petrifying force — a reason not to pursue more service-oriented career goals rather than a temporary holding pattern in a larger process of career discernment.

The great insight of the Truman process, from application through post-selection support, is that it's all too easy for people with wonderful intentions to get sucked along an options-open path for their entire careers, without ever managing to step away and accomplish the career goals with which they began. That's why the Truman Foundation stresses so keenly the ability to devise a coherent and defensible, if ultimately imperfect, pathway from a successful undergraduate career to a field of public service in which the scholar can make a real difference. It is this skill that will ultimately separate those with good intentions from those with real accomplishments.

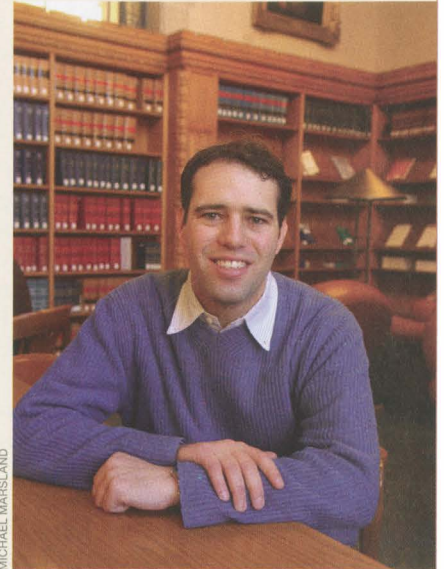
For those of us who want to serve, options must at some point give way to choices; the path well-traveled to the path less so.

Unlike the other contributors to this series, I write this while still in graduate school. For us younger Furman Trumans, one of the great benefits of Furman's stellar Truman record is that as we prepare to launch our careers, role models abound.

I may not be quite as sure of what I want to do with my life as I was when I applied for the Truman five years ago, but I am sure that Furman and the Truman Foundation have given me the tools I need both to revise my plans and, eventually, to carry them out.

— Hal Frampton '02

The author, an urban studies/political science major at Furman, holds a master's degree in geographical analysis from the National University of Ireland. After completing law school this spring, he will clerk for Judge Thomas L. Ambro of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit in Wilmington, Del.



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