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**Connecting**
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Stumbling over statistics

MY SISTER WAS OUT of breath when she picked up the phone. I asked where she'd been, hoping to hear that she'd been playing Frisbee on the lawn in front of her dormitory. "Actually, I was in my adviser's office," she said. In the middle of the semester, she had decided to drop her statistics class.

"I studied really hard for the midterm," she told me. "And I got a 47 on it. Half the class failed, and after she gave back the exams, the professor said that this was the easiest test we'd ever have." My sister's voice started to crack. I sensed that she was not far from tears.

I felt myself getting angry — not at her, but at the teacher who amused herself by failing half a class. This teacher had power, and she knew it. Unless my sister passed statistics, she could not go on to major in psychology. That had been her plan for as long as I could remember. There was more to come after that — graduate school, and with luck, a lifetime of working with disturbed children.

She seemed serious about it. While other kids played on the beach, she spent last summer working in the children's ward of a psychiatric hospital. She was scratched, spat upon, and bruised almost daily. It was the hardest work she'd ever done, but she came home grinning and undaunted. She was so fortunate, I thought, to have this talent and to have found her calling.

AND NOW THERE WAS this professor.

"I went in to see her, because she's my adviser," my sister told me. "And as I came through the door, she said, 'Oh, hello, I thought you'd be leaving us, after the grade you got.'"

I seethed. This was college? Whatever happened to career planning, to intelligent advice? I asked my sister if she'd thought of getting extra help, instead of quitting. She said she'd been to six different tutors. "That's the way they do it," she said. "You just see any tutor who's available."

She understood everything, she said, before the exam. But then something happened. Her mind went blank.

I told her that I thought she should march right back to that adviser and tell her to tear up that drop slip. "You've got to stay in there and fight," I said. Becoming a psychologist was going to be a struggle, I said, but life was like that.

There was a long silence. "I'll tell you," she said. "I don't know if I want to be a psych major anymore. I might have changed my mind. I might want to major in English."

Shakespearean couplets and snatches of Keats drifted through my head. I'd studied a lot of that. English would be fine, if that's what she wanted, but I'd never heard her express any interest in it before.

OK, I said. But what would she do when she graduated? "Who knows," she said. "It's too soon to worry about that."

THE REAL WORLD wasn't even in her dreams. I wanted to say that she'd be out of that ivy-walled college before she knew it. And like every English major I knew, if she wasn't careful, she'd be answering phones and pushing somebody else's papers around a desk. Her shins wouldn't be bruised, but she might be bored.

"I can't stay in that statistics class," she said. "It's messing up my other grades." I tried to explain that at 19, you did not have to sacrifice what you really wanted in order to take care of short-term needs. You did that later, when you had no choice.

She told me she'd made up her mind. "I'm not going to kill myself over this," she said. "Life is too short, and I've got to go now, because I'm meeting somebody for dinner."

We said we'd talk soon and hung up. I sat back and wondered what had happened. Maybe her commitment to psychology was something I'd made up. Maybe I had confused her with me. ■

Cathryn Ramin's column appears on Mondays and Thursdays.