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REPORT ON BUSINESS

Best university education gained outside of classroom

By ERIC GLANVILLE

Friday, October 22, 2004 Page - C1 (1062 words) 

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VANCOUVER -- The spiralling cost of a degree in Canada is perhaps the most pressing issue in our country's educational system. Thousands of young professionals are struggling under the burden of student debt incurred while completing their program.

In addition, there are approximately one million students currently attending Canada's universities and colleges, many of whom are paying up to 30 per cent more in tuition fees this year than they did only 12 months ago.

As a consultant who works with both of these groups on a regular basis, I know the concerns that they (and their parents) have about getting the most out of their academic dollar.

And yet, seven years of work experience has proven to me that the most valuable aspects of my post-secondary education were gained outside the classroom.

For example, in 2002, I interviewed for a position as the communications manager for a small corporate training company in Vancouver. The employer was looking for someone who could produce a major kick-off event with little or no outside assistance.

If my psychology degree had been the only product of my university career, I would never have even been considered for the position.

But during my time on campus, I assisted in producing six years of orientation and special-event programs for thousands of students and parents.

Not only did this experience give me a significant edge in landing that first position, but it also allowed me to deliver a program that became the most profitable revenue stream in the company's portfolio.

As a guest speaker and consultant working with Canadian universities and colleges, I routinely utilize communication, marketing and program development skills that were first developed through extra-curricular activities on campus.

When I speak to student audiences about these invaluable professional development opportunities, I focus on two key aspects of my university experience that I now recognize as having doubled the value of my degree.

Adopting the right attitude

Most students bring a "commuter mentality" to their degree program. Their goal is to finish their courses as quickly as possible, and get out. As a result, their only activities on campus are attending classes and writing assignments or exams.

The most common outcome of this decision is that these individuals move into their professional field with a degree but not much else. They have little or no marketable skills or experience and few connections or opportunities within their chosen field.

In contrast, I was determined to "think outside the classroom." My goal was to get the most out of my campus experience, which meant that I was often engaged in challenging activities that led to significant personal and professional growth.

As a result of this decision, I was able to enter the professional world with not only a degree but also a wealth of valuable skills, contacts and experience that set me apart from the thousands of other students who graduated in the same year.

Engaging the opportunities

I often refer to a college or university campus as "the land of opportunity," because I believe that there is no other place on earth with as many prospects for personal and professional development.

In fact, if I wrote about every opportunity available to students on campus, it would fill the pages of this newspaper for a month. So I'll focus on the ones that had the greatest impact on my professional career.

The first, and perhaps best, of these opportunities lies in the freshmen orientation program. As a new student, I found it to be the fastest way for me to gather key information about the people and programs vital to my academic success.

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But from a professional-development standpoint, the most important decision I ever made was to become an orientation leader.

The sheer number and diversity of activities required to produce a successful program of that scale demanded that I develop a wide range of competencies. These invaluable skills would never have emerged in my academic course work.

For instance, delivering dozens of presentations to more than 20,000 students honed my public-speaking abilities. Writing newsletters and promotional materials increased my communication and marketing skills. And working with new and existing volunteers developed leadership, training and team-working skills that have been critical to my success in the years after graduation.

The networking opportunities in an orientation program are also enormous. People who are leaders in one organization tend to be involved in, if not leaders of, other groups in that community. As a result, I was connected to a vast number of rewarding activities that I would never have been exposed to by sitting in a lecture hall.

From a personal standpoint, I also got a tremendous amount of satisfaction from using my skills and experience to assist others in making their transition to campus life. The community spirit I discovered in orientation programs fostered a lasting dedication to social development programs in my city and country. By engaging these opportunities, I became a better citizen and more valuable professional.

Taking part in a co-op employment program was another very rewarding opportunity. Not only were the positions I found more challenging than my previous summer jobs, they also gave me an opportunity to gain practical experience of great benefit to future employers, even before I graduated.

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For example, through the co-op program, I was employed as the media and public relations co-ordinator for an innovative federal government project. That taught me how to work effectively with the local and national media -- a very useful skill that added significant value to my professional portfolio.

A third opportunity for students to add value to their degree is available through the campus chapters of major professional associations. For a fraction of the standard membership fee, students can gain access to these associations' educational and networking opportunities. The mentorship connections with experienced professionals can enhance their understanding of the professional world and facilitate their advancement within it.

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I am living proof students can offset the rising cost of education by taking advantage of professional development opportunities on campus.

By balancing their academic efforts with challenging and enjoyable extra-curricular activities, students can maximize the value of their degree and hit the ground running when they enter the professional marketplace.

Eric Glanville is a speaker and consultant in the student affairs field.

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