

Good to Know



Alumni share strategies
for making the most of college

By Lora Shinn



In May 2015, prior to starting his full-time MBA program in September, Joshua Rodriguez visited the MBA Career Management office at the University of Washington's Foster School of Business. Even before beginning his graduate studies, the West Point graduate and former U.S. Army troop commander was eager to start exploring his options for a post-MBA career.

"Anyone who has accepted an offer to enroll in the Foster MBA program is eligible to meet with someone at the MBA Career Management office," Rodriguez says. The staff members provide career assistance such as one-on-one coaching, online resources, workshops, meet-and-greet lunches with representatives of prospective employers, and facilitating connections with tech companies students want to visit on the West Coast.

The MBA Career Management (MBACM) coaches reviewed Rodriguez's résumé and recommended updating it a

bit. Rodriguez shared his career goals and asked for help with business connections. "I had no idea what I was going to ultimately do," he says, "but I did know what I was looking for, and what my goals were." He wanted to help other people, and be part of a business that had a strong and dynamic culture, he says.

When he started his MBA classes that September, the MBACM staff were already familiar with him and his goals, and they were able to speedily match him with appropriate company representatives visiting campus to meet with students.

In fact, Rodriguez was one of a handful of students invited to an informational lunch in October 2015 with representatives of Goldman Sachs, who explained their company culture. Rodriguez, in turn, was able to describe what he was looking for in a job. "When Goldman Sachs came on campus, they were talking about earning a deep level of trust and maintaining it," he says. "They said this was at the

core of the firm's success. It's a firm that puts its clients first and believes that by helping good people succeed, the firm's success will follow suit."

In the summer of 2016, Rodriguez did an internship at Goldman Sachs, and in the fall of 2016 he was offered a job as a private wealth manager with the company's Investment Management Division, even though he had not yet graduated. He completed his MBA in June 2017 and then went to work for the company.

As Rodriguez's experience shows, a proactive approach to cultivating connections can be a good strategy for college students. Often, students don't realize the "power of the Foster network," whether in undergraduate or graduate-level studies, and more students should tap into that network, says Zak Sheerazi, associate director of the EY Center for Career Advancement at the Foster School. He's also a third-year student in Foster's part-time Evening MBA Program. For example,





using LinkedIn, Foster School students can find and meet with fellow Foster School alumni who work at companies the students would like to research, Sheerazi says. Or students can use the school's mentor-mentee program, which matches students with Foster grads who mentor the students during the school year.

"You get some perspective about doing some of the things you're interested in; you do informational interviews; and you maybe even meet mentors not in your functional area," Sheerazi says. "At the end of the day, you've learned from someone who had more experience than you on how to move up in a company and how to navigate your own career. You learn from someone who has been there, done that."

Below, several successful graduates share additional strategies for making the most of college-related opportunities.

Focus on What You Love



Grant Varnau, who in May received a bachelor's degree in physics from San Diego State University, recommends choosing to study a field you love—



don't just think about the earning power of a field. "A lot of people get pushed into the science and engineering job market but realize, 'I hate this,' after they're too far in to get out," he says.



He adds that not only does picking the right major require careful thought, so does choosing the right school for you. He says he was accepted by several schools for his undergraduate degree, but he ended up selecting a school that offered great classes in his field, coupled with the best financial aid package. He feels that employers respect the learning associated with a degree, even if it is obtained from a state school versus an Ivy League school, and attending San Diego State allowed him to avoid going into debt.

His passion for his chosen major of physics helped him "keep the candle

burning" during all-night study sessions or when he didn't make a perfect grade, he says. People tried to talk him out of his focus area, noting that the department was small; few people majored in physics; and classes were difficult. But, he says, "I loved studying and learning with friends in a tight community."

Focusing on his passion helped Varnau with time-management decisions, as well. Instead of overloading his academic schedule, he took fewer classes so that he could achieve better grades and have time for outside-the-classroom activities, such as running the Society of Physics Students, acting as treasurer of the Weber Honors College Student Society, and volunteering to teach physics and chemistry at a local low-income high school. He was also able to participate in independent research labs with professors, which provided several college credits.

In addition, he visited professors during the office hours they posted to indicate when they were available for students to come by. "Going to office hours is one of the best things you can do," Varnau says, "because when it's time to apply for graduate school, you'll want to know departmental professors who can write personalized, enthusiastic letters of recommendation."

You can also find faculty members at department colloquiums/seminars, he says. "This is another great way to meet faculty, staff, graduate students and other undergraduates while learning about on-campus research. And food and coffee are almost always provided."

After getting his bachelor's degree, Varnau headed straight to the University of Arizona, where he plans to earn a Ph.D. in chemical physics, which combines physics and chemistry to solve multidisciplinary research problems.

"After getting my Ph.D., I hope to complete a post-doctoral fellowship and become a faculty member at a university," he says.

Explore Assistantships and Faculty Mentoring



Suzanne Flores Phillips, who graduated in June 2007 with a master's degree in college student services administration (which deals with student life outside the classroom) from Oregon State University, was a first-generation college student on a limited income. She needed to reduce her graduate-school education costs.

When she applied to the CSSA master's program, she was excited to learn about a way to pay her tuition: an assistantship. She interviewed to obtain one, and after becoming one of the 18 people the program accepted—out of more than 80 applicants—she landed an assistantship in which she worked 20 hours a week in OSU's University Housing and Dining Services department as their assessment and promotions specialist.

Phillips says she benefited from mentoring provided by Eric Hansen, her direct supervisor for her graduate assistantship, and a faculty member in the CSSA program, who was himself a program graduate. "Once I connected with him, he helped me navigate the rest of it, and understand the field itself—how to network, and the professional organizations out there," she says.

His mentoring was so helpful, she wishes that during her undergraduate studies she had reached out to a trusted faculty member who could have helped her prepare for the application and interview process to get into her master's program. "I was a first-generation student, so I winged it," Phillips says. Fortunately, everything turned out OK. With her master's degree in hand, she now works as regional network director and alumni diversity coordinator for the Oregon State University Alumni Association.

Apply Learning

Jason Patz, who in June received an MBA from the University of Oregon's executive



MBA program in Portland, recommends applying classroom learning to the real world.

Early in his program, he left his position as CEO of a data-center-technology company to start Go Trashy Inc., a digital marketplace where consumers connect with independent junk haulers. Group MBA projects allowed Patz to work closely with and learn from fellow executive students in many industries, including finance, insurance, construction, defense, health-care and more. He was able to bring workplace challenges to his fellow students and to lean on the collective experience of the group to help make more informed decisions.

“I didn’t expect to capture as much knowledge from school as I did, and I was surprised at how much there was to know, especially later in my career, at 42,” he says. “The MBA program had me thinking and acting on my business in ways that added value along the way, and productivity was improved as a result.”

For example, marketing classes offered frameworks for high-level product strategy and market entry, he says. Economic components of his MBA program helped him “understand how business decisions should be made, even when at times seeming counterintuitive. These courses and frameworks helped me to secure significant funding for the business, because we were able to deliver a more convincing investor pitch.”

Accept Opportunities

Carly MacKinnon, who graduated from Washington State University in December 2013, with a bachelor’s degree in sport management, had a full load of classes and participated in team sports at the university, but special opportunities kept popping up.

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For example, she joined the Sport Club Council, which was responsible for disciplining and resolving student issues, such as a team that didn't follow travel rules. As a result, she built problem-solving skills.

She acted as a student representative as the school prepared to hire the next tenured sport-management professor. She participated in group interviews of applicants from all over the world. As a result, she learned skills that might be useful in hiring.

In her junior year, she was invited to Houston by Atavus Rugby & Football, a Seattle-based company that assists with talent identification, camps, coach education and player development for young people and adults. Company founders include coach Waisale Serevi, "the Michael Jordan of seven-on-seven rugby," she says. In conjunction with Atavus events at the Women's Sevens World Series, she helped run an Atavus camp the day before the tournament, and during the tournament she handled Atavus social media efforts and engaged with fans for the company. She also helped organize local schoolgirls in the stands into teams that played flag rugby during a break between the Women's Sevens games. As a result, she learned about event logistics, talking to potential customers, and how to organize and communicate with a group.

MacKinnon's broad experience helped her land a dream job after graduation. She was hired by Atavus. Today, she runs the photo library, does blogging, drives social media interactions and writes marketing email communications.

"I kept raising my hand, and kept a 'Put me in, coach,' mentality," MacKinnon says. ■

Writer Lora Shinn lives in Seattle.

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