

## Real Advice from Real People

Advising students on life in The Real World can be difficult for some professors. It turns out that it can be hard to report on the current status of something when you've been away from it for so long. While universities are not the "ivory towers" that some make them out to be, life in a university can be a somewhat sheltered existence, quite different from the relentless drive toward profit and growth that is typical of many businesses. Some professors work regularly with colleagues outside the university, but others have no such opportunity. Even those who do collaborate outside the university tend to work with colleagues in research and development, rather than "in the trenches" with the main body of the organization.

I recently became the director of an undergraduate program for the first time in my career, and found myself in a position of advising undergraduate students on course, career, and life choices. Students hoped that I could provide them with some insight that might help them to understand their own paths more clearly. While I had maintained contacts and friendships with industry statisticians throughout my life, I did not feel particularly in tune with the day-to-day life of statisticians in business, industry, and government, especially those at the B.Sc. level. I felt that I owed my students better service than what I was prepared to give. I clearly needed help; I needed a crash course in The Real World!

Fortunately, the program that I now direct, the Management and Systems Science (MSSC) Program at Simon Fraser University Surrey, has just such a crash course built into it for the students, the MSSC Seminar. The MSSC Seminar is a 1-credit class meeting Tuesday evenings. I invite Real People with Real Jobs to come in and talk to our students about their careers, their education, their lives, their organizations, or whatever else they think might be interesting and/or useful for the students. We've heard from computer programmers, product managers, scientists, statisticians, engineers and people in many other career paths. We've had visits from CEOs and new hires and everything in between: middle-managers and independent business owners, workers in large companies and entrepreneurs. It's been an amazingly diverse group of speakers with huge variability in backgrounds and experiences. And as the instructor for the course, I get the benefit of sitting in and listening to each speaker's perspectives on many topics.

Speakers' opinions vary on some things, but on certain others they speak with a single voice. I was initially surprised, and eventually amused, as speaker after speaker stressed the importance of the same fundamental skills, without prompting from me. The surprise came because the skills that they stressed were *not* the academic ones, the things that the program designers hold dear as the core curriculum of the program. Rather, they were skills that we normally think of as peripheral, things that we don't often emphasize within our otherwise rigorous programs.

I'd like to share with you some of the items that *all* speakers I have had so far – about 25 to date – unanimously agree are important things for students to work on while they are still in

university. Think of this as Real Advice from Real People, things that will serve you well no matter what direction you choose in your own life and career path:

1. **Build your communication skills.** Unless you live in a plastic bubble, you are going to need to work with other people. You will be given tasks by other people, collaborate with other people to achieve those tasks, and ultimately have to report the results of your work to other people. You need to be able to speak clearly and concisely, listen carefully, write well (and quickly), and give informative and interesting presentations. Contrary to popular belief *the person who learns to do these things well will advance farther than someone who has better technical capabilities but poor communication skills!* Management usually can't tell the difference between a good statistician and a great one, but they can see immediately who communicates their results well and who does so poorly. Unfortunately, most university environments stress working alone and in isolation, completely the opposite of what life will be like on the other side of graduation.

**You need to take actions to ensure that your communication skills are sharp.** These actions can include: (i) Taking a writing class, especially one that stresses technical writing, which has a completely different flavour from essay writing; (ii) Taking a class in verbal communication, and in particular one that covers the fine art of making and delivering presentations; (iii) Taking business courses, especially those in business communication and organizational structure and behaviour, so that you can better understand your audience and learn to arrange your communications accordingly; (iv) Seeking out courses that expressly advertise group project work and/or presentations, even (*especially!*) if these things scare you. All of our speakers indicate that anything that you can do to practice your communication skills will have a positive effect on your employability and advancement.

2. **Network like mad.** It's a simple fact that *most of the speakers I've talked with got their jobs because they knew somebody at the place where they were hired.* It wasn't that they had successfully sucked up to the owner or their future boss, but maybe a friend or a former classmate or coworker already worked there and recommended the current job to them. (That's exactly how I got *this* job!). The more people you know, the better the chance that one of them will someday happen to show up in a position to be of some help to you.

That's the real essence of networking. It's not about using people to climb the proverbial ladder of success or learning to kiss peoples' ... um...rings. One of our most popular speakers, Sam Thiara, the Student Affairs Officer for the Faculty of Business Administration (FBA) at SFU, is almost what you might call a "professional networker". Part of his job is to get to know the students in the FBA, to get to know people in the vast world of business outside the university, and to help to bring these groups together. Sam

*hates* the word “networking,” because it brings forth that negative connotation of getting to know people just so you can use them later for some kind of gain. He tells the story of seeing some students at a business fair shaking hands and exchanging cards with people at an almost frenzied pace, as if it were a contest to collect as many business cards as possible and there were some sort of prize for the winner. Weeks later, none of those students would really remember the business people they met, and much worse, the only thing the business people took away from those students was a stack of cards. *No one left a special impression!*

Sam instead refers to the process of **relationship building**. The whole point is not to acquire business cards, but to acquire relationships: people you could bump into and say “hi” to, people you could meet for coffee, people you could e-mail an honest question to, or whose questions you could answer. People you might eventually call “friend”. You don’t just seek out people “above” you, but rather anyone you can hold a conversation with. **“Talk to strangers”** is the advice Sam gives. You will never know if a stranger has, or will someday have, the key to an opportunity for you if you don’t get to know her or him. Look at it another way: think about the person who is now your best friend. Unless you were born together, at one point in your lives you were strangers! So don’t be afraid to talk to the person next to you in class or at a club meeting or in the store.

3. **Branch out.** *Everyone I have talked to about this agrees: Companies would rather hire a student with good technical competence and a wide range of experiences outside the classroom, than a student with a 4.0 who has done nothing but schoolwork.* This is probably the most surprising thing that the students in our seminar series have heard. Practically speaking, it means that you are better off spending a few hours each week or month getting involved in social, athletic, or community activities, and losing a few tenths of a point off of your GPA, than you would be by spending all of your available time studying. **Put down the books and get out there!** Join a club. *Start* a club if you can’t find one to join. Dust off your musical instrument and play it in the community band. Sing in a choir. Play soccer for a local team. Or, best of all **volunteer**.

*Volunteering is a win-win-win activity* says Sam Thiara. It’s good for the person doing the volunteering, because there is a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction that comes from volunteer service that you can’t really get in many other ways. (And the director of the organization you choose to work for will eventually be an excellent candidate for a job reference, but that’s not the main reason for volunteering.) It’s good for the organization that you choose to help. And, interestingly, it’s good for the future employer who hires the community-minded, broad-thinking worker who is likely to make positive contributions to the organization beyond just clocking in and clocking out. The important thing is to pick something that you will enjoy doing, something that you feel a

strong affinity for, and not just something to pad your résumé. The benefits will follow naturally, especially if you work your way into a position of leadership. So go spend some time at a homeless shelter or a food bank. Be a student ambassador or serve in student governance at your university. Coach a youth soccer or hockey team. Be a Big Brother or Big Sister. Adopt a highway. Help out at the local zoo. Contact your local volunteer clearinghouses for ideas (I just googled “volunteer bc” and found tons of volunteer opportunities near where I live). Whatever it is that you do, just make sure that you **do excellent work!**

I should take a moment to point out that what business employers look for in people and what graduate schools and university employers look for are different things. For positions where learning and research are the main focus, like grad student or professor, technical competence is primary. The student with the 4.0 in subject-area work will probably be more impressive than the one with the 3.0 accompanied by a mastery of powerpoints and a long history of volunteerism, unless the latter student can somehow demonstrate comparable levels of competence (which is a lot easier if s/he knows someone at the university being considered!). Nonetheless, you will eventually be looking for a job somewhere, and these skills and experiences will surely serve you then.

There is no magic formula for success. There is no guarantee that you will land your dream job even if you do all of these things. But you can certainly increase your chances of getting to where you are comfortable and happy in your job and life by using your excellent communication skills, actively building meaningful relationships, and being more than just a bookworm. The opportunities for developing these traits do not increase as you go further into your life and education. So **now is the time to act!**