



SEIZING OPPORTUNITIES OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

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Sometimes as college students, we feel as though life is getting the best of us. Maybe we have too much on our plate, maybe we don't learn well in that auditorium of two hundred students. In the end, being a student is all about growing. College is one long, drawn-out, frantic, and valuable learning experience.

But what most students fail to comprehend is just how much students can gain from college that has nothing to do with their GPA or a classroom curriculum. Experiential learning is one of the most crucial opportunities that many students don't take advantage of. Whether it's working for non-profits or in corporate America, those experiences are what help you mature as a person and grow as a professional. We all want to grow in as many ways as possible in these critical years in our lives, but few take advantage of the extensive opportunities that are available. College teaches you not to make the mistake of living within the barriers and images you have for yourself. It forces you to be consistently uncomfortable so your mindset is forced to expand and shift at a rapid rate. It teaches you to be understanding of those who have different stories than you do and to accept your failures and use them as fuel for the next endeavor. The classes and exams are important, but the experiences, mistakes, and life lessons are what help us grow as adults personally and professionally.

In college, it's easy to surround yourself with people who are similar to you. You are in classes with people in the same age group and, in major-specific classes, many similar interests. Not to mention all instruction is coming from one source, the professors. It's easy to fall into a routine.

When I was 18, I made the decision to jump outside my comfort zone and volunteer with Habitat for Humanity in Chile. Living in a hostel for two weeks isn't really the first thing a recent high school graduate wants to do. Nevertheless, a few weeks away from my first day of college, I hopped on a plane by myself headed for South America. I always knew I loved to help people and had been wanting to go on a mission trip for years, so Habitat for Humanity seemed like a match made in heaven. I didn't know a single person on the trip, but it was an experience that sparked a new confidence in me. Twelve individuals with diverse ages and backgrounds soon became like family members. We met with the family we were building a house for on the first day. They lived in a slum just outside of Santiago. A few years earlier, their youngest son was playing near the washer where there was water on the floor. He was electrocuted and left paralyzed and blind. Our objective was to build them a home that was handicap accessible and suitable for these well deserving people. Even with all they have been through, I have never seen a family so happy to be alive. It made me so grateful for the life I have. Working with, and for, people different from you helps you develop better ways to communicate and understand how important relationships are. This experience changed my life. No longer was I worried about things like traveling on my own, meeting new diverse people, or trying something new. Your twenties are the perfect time to get outside your comfort zone. The greatest harm we can do to ourselves is to not take chances. It is as the saying goes: Fear is temporary; regret will last a lifetime. I would have always regretted it if I didn't go on the trips I've been on. Encounters like these stimulate an open mind and help you formulate opinions. The following years I continued to work with Habitat for Humanity and

met some amazing human beings along the way. Sometimes volunteering isn't cheap, especially if you want to travel to do it. However, when it's all said and done, you will have gained more than lost, and be happy you went.

Working in the real world has a similar effect to volunteering. When you start a job, you'll be expected to bring something to the table. You should be organized, confident and proactive, but sometimes, it's hard to know where to begin. That's why internships and co-ops come in handy. You will make mistakes, but it's improving after those mistakes that make the rest of it a little easier. You are compelled to mature when functioning in a workplace with professionals. When in school, I compare myself to my peers instead of focusing on my own work. I have learned that though I may be very uncertain in my work for school, the work place is a very different environment. I doubted myself for my first two years of school until I started at my first co-op. In the beginning, I was very wary to be adventurous with my designs. I didn't want to make anything too crazy in fear of it not being what they were looking for. **I learned something important that day that has stuck with me since.** I was told to stop playing it safe, it's better to go bigger, bolder, and outside the box rather than try to make everything right. I learned that work ethic, professionalism, and punctuality goes a long way. You also gain loads of confidence from hard work. That self-confidence makes you more comfortable approaching superiors and expressing your ideas.

As we are one step closer to graduation and accepting a full time job, you need the right tools to score that job you want. More than 77 percent of students surveyed said internships helped them decide what they truly wanted in their

future careers. The classes you take help you know if you enjoy the skill, but it doesn't aid in knowing if you like the job. You are able to learn valuable information and a better understanding of your field because you are living. There are things you gain that you will never be taught in a classroom. My first two co-ops were in an office setting and that helped me realize first hand that although I loved the work I was doing, I did not like sitting at a desk all day. When you are spending the majority of your day and week in a specific environment, you discover whether you can sit at a desk for eight hours a day or if it makes you a little stir crazy. The culture of a workplace is also essential. Some workplaces are casual and relaxed, and some are cold, literally. Everyone has different preferences and attitudes, and everyone works differently in different settings. Workplace culture creates an environment that can strengthen or weaken performance. The way you fit in to a workplace is very important to employers.

If you're like me, you're consistently looking for ways to diversify yourself from the others; those internships and volunteer trips will do just that. Along with boosting your resume, the confidence you gain from experiential learning boosts your sureness in yourself in every other area of your life. College is meant to challenge us as students, but also to challenge us as people. Sure, we're all here for a good education that will hopefully lead to a promising career path, but we are also here to get completely lost in new perspectives, skill sets and versions of ourselves. Through my experiences, it's the practical learning I've done that has cultivated the most growth.

