

University grads heading to college
Lack of career planning can limit graduates of general degree programs

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EDMONTON - When Shyla Young Price enrolled at the University of Alberta to study political science, her career plans were fuzzy.

CREDIT: Larry Wong, The Journal
Shyla Young Price, left, and Eli Ritz are studying public relations at MacEwan College.

"I've always wanted to have a hand in influencing the world around me, and I thought political science would help me do that," she says.

But when she graduated in 2003, she realized that launching a career would take more than a liberal arts degree. "I was so shocked when I got out of university and figured out I couldn't actually do anything."

So, Young Price took a job as a library assistant, where she put her research skills to good use and for a while, she flirted with the idea of doing a master's degree in information sciences. But it wasn't a fit. "After a while, I was like, 'This is not where I'm meant to be.' "

Now, after researching her career options, Young Price is registered in a 10-month public relations diploma at Edmonton's Grant MacEwan College. She's been told that upon graduation, she'll easily secure a job in the broad field of public relations -- and she believes it. After completing an eight-week practicum, she's confident she'll have the skills to start her career.

While many of Young Price's friends are taking master's programs, many of her college classmates have a degree under their belts -- 32 per cent are working on a second credential.

Young Price thinks it's common for liberal arts students to focus on learning rather than career planning. "They want to feel things out, and see where it takes them."

Fellow student Eli Ritz found work after completing a bachelor of arts in English related to public relations. But after working a few jobs in

promotions and marketing, Ritz realized his ideal jobs required a specific skill set.

A master's degree would have required a serious time commitment and a cross-country move, so Ritz chose MacEwan. "I'd heard a lot of good things about the Grant MacEwan program and I knew some people who'd gone through it and gave it rave reviews."

Victoria career coach Michele Waters agrees. In fact, few undergraduate students in general do much career planning before or after their degrees. And more and more university graduates are heading to college -- and not graduate school -- after wrapping up their degrees.

"I have people with master's (degrees) coming to me and saying, 'I really think I should take an office administration program' because they can't get a job," she says.

For many, college can be a good decision. A diploma program can get you into the workforce sooner and certain college programs -- particularly trades and technology programs -- are lucrative.

Trades and technology-based programs also prepare people for self-employment later on, says Waters. College programs also have the added benefit of being fairly portable. Most will allow you to work in provinces across the country.

But Waters cautions that education alone won't guarantee career success. Some employers are partial to college graduates, and others prefer four years in academia. "It all comes down to the employer's bias."

Whether you've got a college diploma or three master's degrees, selling your experience to your employer is key. Being ashamed that you took a longer route to find a career, or that you've got a diploma and not a degree, isn't conducive to success. "Be proud of all of these benchmarks along the way, and the employer will pick up on it."

A degree is not just about securing a job and education of any kind is never a waste of time, she adds. "It's one of the ways to learn about oneself and the world, and to learn skills. And the particular discipline of going to university or college is transferable to the world of work," says Waters.

She adds that it's important to put education into perspective. People enter the workforce in a variety of ways. "Education is one of the entry points, but there's also attitude and personal purpose. There's many factors that affect how an employer chooses a candidate."

But in general, to avoid completing a program that doesn't suit your career interests, or racking up more debt than you want to, avoid letting others influence your post-secondary pursuits. Be especially wary of parents hoping to live vicariously and overly opinionated peers.

Also be aware of your reasons for continuing your education upon graduation. Some pursue further studies to defer starting a career, says Waters.

Especially if you haven't received any career planning guidance in college, take advantage of career centres on campus, as well as co-op and work placements within your faculty.

Those pursuing grad studies should take some time off between degrees to gain work experience and perspective on how the world works, says Waters.

Young Price says she doesn't regret her degree -- "I learned a lot and I loved it," she says -- but she agrees that career planning can make things simpler.

"I think students should be made a little more aware of the necessity of really picking a career path before (they) go into university."

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