

College grad says success in real world takes early planning

By MICHELE HIMMELBERG
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NEWPORT BEACH, Calif. - The Alta Coffee & Roasting Co. is a cool enough place. Tucked into an eclectic neighborhood on 31st Street, it serves a good latte and the occasional poetry reading or music jam.

It's just not the kind of workplace Melissa English had envisioned while studying for a business/economics degree at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

But there she was, a high school valedictorian who graduated from college with honors, pouring coffee and politely asking if she should leave room for cream.

Her credentials-no clue what to do in the real world-helped her rapidly advance to the position of president and CEO of the "I've got my degree, now what?" club.

Meanwhile, she cringed each time she took an order from a young, well-dressed professional who apparently had figured out how to put his or her education to good use.

English tells this cruel story on herself.

She left the coffee house about two years ago, did accounting work for six months, got laid off and now works in the mortgage industry, at Duxford Financial Inc. in Newport Beach.

She also wrote a pair of booklets that she hopes will prevent other students from stumbling around the way she did on her way from school to career.

The booklets are aimed at high school and college students, with slight variations.

The college edition, with a yellow caution sign on the cover, is titled "The College-Educated Waiter; How are you going to apply your degree?" The high school edition has a red cover: "Valedictorian turned Waiter; Why you need to think about careers NOW!"

English self-published the booklets and is looking for a way to distribute them in high schools and colleges.

"I learned too late that college is only part of the puzzle," she said. "You have to plan for a career. Just because you have a degree doesn't mean you are guaranteed a professional job you will love. You have to do the legwork. ... early on in your college experience. The time to start thinking about careers is now!"

She repeats this last line several times, concerned that students will dismiss it.

The books are written in a fun, breezy style, with helpful exercises and illustrations drawn by a friend.

They include letters from other students, some who successfully found jobs they liked and some who thought the perfect career would magically appear within weeks after graduation.

English, 25, still lives in Newport Beach and thrives on the California lifestyle, surfing and snowboarding and playing guitar.

But the grief still quivers in her face as she ticks off some of her advice for students who have no career direction.

Don't pay for tuition-or let parents pay-before you've investigated jobs or careers you might like doing someday.

Do use the career center and library, but keep going. Get some hands-on experience in fields that interest you.

Do internships early-junior and senior year of high school.

Network with people in the field you're pursuing.

Don't choose a college major first. Choose a career first.

English offers herself up as an "unsuccessful role model."

"You think you're doing everything right, being really focused on classes, working hard and getting good grades," she said. "But it wasn't a very good plan because I didn't know where I was going.

"Once you're out of school, your flexibility goes down the drain. You might not find out until then that you don't like sitting in a cubicle, but you still have bills to pay."

English thought she was being practical when she chose business and economics as a major. Her father took the same approach and is a successful computer engineer. Her mother, an artist, nudged her in that direction.

Only now does English realize she ignored many of her own creative talents and interests because she was so focused on getting a degree.

After college, she began custom-painting furniture and occasionally sells her pieces, and she takes on interior-design projects.

But that's likely to remain a side interest because she intends to go back to school for a master's degree.

While at UCSB, English explored resources at the career center, but found the "2-inch thick books" to be intimidating. She wishes she had started looking for career guidance in high school, peppering counselors with more questions about career fields than college applications. She wishes she had taken more time to get on-the-job experience to augment her studies.

"Most schools just aren't addressing this issue, and if they do it's sporadic," she said. "Until they do, it's up to parents to encourage children to explore careers early."

The parents of one of her high school chums did get involved, encouraging their child to network in the field of graphic arts and work as an intern during senior year. The girl discovered how much she liked it and focused her efforts in that direction.

"By the time she was a senior in college, she had relationships with companies and knew exactly what she wanted to do," English said. "She had a much easier transition into the work force. My parents loved me just as much as hers did, but they weren't as specific about what I needed to do."

English has discovered that some parents are worried that students won't go to college if they get interested in a career field first. So she's careful to stress that she's an advocate of a college education, so long as students also study how to apply it.

"You hear about these people who change careers six or seven times," she said, shaking her head. "It's because they never found one that really fit."

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