

# Life after university:

## *How to get a job in the real world*

**By Lindsay Jolivet**

The Silhouette (McMaster)

HAMILTON (CUP) – Dan Leibner, a 2007 McMaster University graduate with an honours in political science and communication studies, does not have encouraging stories about his transition from university to the workplace.

“Personally, I’ve had trouble getting the job that I want and I’m not sure exactly what to do about it,” he said.

For students in an ever-changing society, graduation presents a new lifestyle, new challenges, and new responsibilities as they leave the safety-net school and enter the big, bad world.

Jacqueline Hampshire, events and marketing coordinator for Career Services at McMaster in Hamilton, Ont., feels that in some ways, the student lifestyle cuts students off from the society they will have to engage with after graduation.

“[Students] tend to live in a little bit of a campus bubble,” said Hampshire.

Students study, attend lectures, hang out, and sometimes work and live on campus; Hampshire notes this ties many of their experiences directly to the university.

Patrick Burek, career counselling leader at McMaster’s Career Services, says students have difficulty transferring their lessons from campus to real life.

“I think one of the challeng-

es for many students is that those who are thinking completely that this is the stage in their life where they are going to focus on education, and when they leave here they’re going to focus exclusively on work . . . aren’t engaging as much in the world outside of McMaster,” said Burek.

“As a result, they might not be learning in parallel how to apply the skills they are developing here, or even how to identify the skills that they’re developing here . . . as to what is valuable to employers.”

However, Burek says a campus-centered lifestyle has benefits.

“Having your life centered around a university campus, where in some ways they are a little bit buffered from some of the immediate pressures and demands of [society] . . . so that they have the opportunity to delve into studies in a deeper, uninterrupted way,” he said.

Burek says the most important trick to connecting student lives with the work force is recognizing the skills university provides.

“The people here that are graduating are very skilled, and employers recognize the skills within them. I think the students might not fully recognize the skills that they’ve gained while they were here because all their peers have the same skills and they’re sort of taking it for granted,” he said.

Furthermore, he says many

students misinterpret the assets that employers value. Since students spend their time studying, learning, and understanding the content of courses, Burek says they often feel the mastery of their programs’ content makes them most employable.

“I think, probably, for the majority of employers that we work with, they’re most concerned with the skills that students develop in the process of mastering the content,” he said.

But, Burek says an entirely different set of skills makes post-secondary graduates employable.

“Advanced communication skills both in verbal and writing, critical thinking, and creative problem-solving skills,” he said.

“The ability to think has always been in high market demand, and I can’t foresee that ever going out of style. At the essence of the university experience, it teaches people how to think.”

Hampshire adds a number of skills to this list, adapted from the Conference Board of Canada’s employability skills checklist.

“No matter which program you’re from, no matter which faculty you’ve studied in, [it outlines] those skills that the employers seek, that they want the candidate to have when they’re coming into the work force – and it’s simple things like responsibility, adaptability, time management, communication.”

She says students develop

some of these skills by being in a post-secondary environment, where immediacy reins daily activities. Assignments, job applications, planning a night out – things tend to be right here, right now. By the fourth year of studies, organizational and time-management skills become imperative to success.

“Those types of skills are sometimes missed by students because they’re things you don’t think about, you just do,” Hampshire said.

Burek also mentions the importance of learning to work collaboratively as well as independently, and respecting diversity.

“Most employers today, particularly at the professional level, don’t want to supervise their staff, they want to lead them, and they rely on their staff for creative ideas and new and innovative ways of working.”

Some students don’t feel their studies alone provide them with enough valuable skills.

“There’s a ton of competition out there and today, I don’t think a bachelor of arts really separates you from anyone else,” Leibner said.

Recent concerns about the decreasing value of an undergraduate degree can add stress to the transition from school.

Tanya Mazur, a McMaster career advisor, has some comforting words on the worth of a degree.

“The number of university students has increased

over the years and . . . the novelty is wearing off of it a little bit. But that doesn’t mean that it’s not useful, and I don’t think students should be weary of that fact. I think it’s just a matter of adding something to it.”

Co-ops, internships, work, volunteering, and post-undergraduate schooling provide opportunities for supplementing undergraduate studies.

Leibner is currently considering post-graduate studies.

Similarly, Meg Banks, who received her honours bachelor of arts in English and history in 2007, began to consider supplementing her undergraduate degree shortly after graduating.

“It’s surprisingly easy at first; you can get drunk more often, you have more money, you’re less stressed out – it’s great,” she said. “Then you go home for Christmas and your aunt asks you what you’ve been doing with your year and you go: ‘Nothing. Absolutely nothing.’ And then you freak out and start applying [to] grad schools.”

Career services emphasizes that experience gained beyond the academic curriculum, in the form of volunteering or working, will not only further develop skills, but will establish a sense of confidence.

Mazur notes that students are starting to realize that combining their studies with outside experiences truly gives them the whole package.