A millennial appeal: What now?

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Alumni Lunch Series

Dueling drums set a beat in every student’s consciousness. One is sharp and insistent, bongos punctuated with cymbals: “It’s due Friday?” “Eight pages? Really?” The other beat has a slower tempo – deeper, punctuated with a dread-inducing bass line: “The future?” “What then?” “Maybe I should look into graduate school.” CHaSS can calm those fears. And it’s not just because of the Gossner chocolate milk served with lunch.

It happens during each of our Alumni Lunch Series, where the head of the table is an alum of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences — now successful, but who well remembers that drum beat. The lunch series, introduced in the fall of 2018, seats an alumnus with students from a variety of disciplines in the humanities. CHaSS has hosted such earlier events as Lunch with a Lawyer. Like that series, the Alumni Lunch Series has grown so popular that its future isn’t in doubt. As the first season winds up, Dean Joe Ward has noticed that students aren’t showing up at the events to hear about specific careers, though 2018-2019 speakers included broadcast journalists, Foreign Service officers, lobbyists, entrepreneurs and more.

Students, he said, are seeking any help in safely crossing that frightening chasm between graduation and life dream. Our “been-there” alumni helpfully lay out the steps – and risks – they took themselves. The advice is practical, timely and reality-honed. Like this tip from a successful TV anchor: “Take all the shifts no one else wants.”

Or this offered by an alum who served as a top aide for the president of Sierra Leone: “Always follow up an interview with a phone call. You will not die.”

“Alumni help our students connect what they’re learning from our faculty members with opportunities for careers after college,” Ward said.

Plus, it’s just fun. Some of the stories our alumni have to tell are worthy of novels. Others are evidence that the ladder to success includes a few rungs that are humbling (though laughable in hindsight). Plus, lunch is free.

Here is a sampling of advice offered by just a couple of speakers:

Therese Anderson Grinceri

English Literature 1996 | London-based producer for “The One Show,” a daily variety and news magazine TV show for BBC1, reaching some 4-5 million viewers nightly

Goal while in college: To write and edit for Life magazine (“It’s no longer around, but I love this magazine and had my mind set on becoming an editor for it,” she says). Or, as a backup dream, she says, Seventeen magazine.

About Therese Grinceri

As an English Literature major, Grinceri’s first “real job” (after an internship at the Deseret News) was as a press aide for former Gov. Mike Leavitt. Later, as a student in the Columbia University School of Journalism, she served three internships with NBC, including researching material for “Late Night with Seth Meyers.”

Grinceri is a Cache Valley native, and she remembers hiding in her Logan bedroom to make call after call inquiring about internships. Her life has been marked by a number of relocations as her husband, Alan, traveled internationally as he worked toward to a law career. That’s how she arrived in New York City and, as a mom of three, applied to the Columbia School of Journalism. Her NBC internship paid $10 an hour, offsetting the babysitting costs, she said.

Looking back, she notes, “I’ve had probably three careers off the back of my English Literature degree.”

Some of her advice to students

“If you can learn to write clearly and persuasively, you can do anything. When I was a student, I decided to write to the editor of Life magazine, Roger Rosenblatt, to get some advice. He told me two things: Study a subject, not a trade, and to read things that were written well. That is such a key piece of advice.”

She recalls that in a USU creative nonfiction writing class, the New Yorker magazine was used as the text. She still
loves its eloquent writing. “I highly recommend that you read the New Yorker every week and read it cover to cover,” she said. “It’s not long, but it can really, really help you no matter what field you go into.

Use LinkedIn and Twitter as “search mechanisms to find people you want to get advice from or ask about their careers.” While trying to break into the tight UK TV market, for instance, she searched social media platforms to connect with other graduates of Columbia who were working in broadcast in London. When approaching potentially helpful acquaintances, she said, “don’t ask them for a job because they likely don’t have any available. Do ask them for advice on breaking into the market.”

And be prepared to set out very clearly the information you want from that person, she said. “People really like to give advice, and they like to feel as if somebody has sought them out.”

“When you are in your job role, no matter what level, find a way to be indispensable. If somebody needs this or that, you be the person who goes and does it. Find a way to be confident enough to contribute to everyone around you. Especially when you’re the new person, just be there, willing to help. Also, offer ideas. Watch and observe where you can contribute and be useful.”

Grinceri is active on Twitter and Instagram (@theresegrinceri) and is herself open to giving advice to those who’d like to break into the media industry.

Matt Dawson

Talent Development Manager at Amazon
Goal while in college: international development, perhaps law school.

About Matt Dawson

Matt Dawson bgean his USU life as a major in Political Science. Soon, however, he found himself in language classes, a fortuitous shift now that he looks back, since every job position throughout his career somehow involves his skill in French. “I can relate every role I’ve had to my ability to speak French,” he says. In fact, his French speaking was the only qualification when he was hired for his first post-grad job at a French-Canadian company. He moved on to work for a number of international organizations, including the World Bank, before being sought out by Amazon in 2015 because of his experience in building effective training programs. At Amazon, he’s now responsible for the physical security of some 600,000 employees in more than 75 countries, recruiting and training data-security employees. “Our mission is keeping Amazon’s people, data and products secure,” he said. “My responsibility is making sure people know how to do that,” he said.

Some of his advice to students

Q. I’d love to go abroad, but how do I afford it?
A. “So much multiculturalism surrounds us. In my situation, going international opened my eyes up. But even in Utah, there’s a huge refugee and immigrant population. It’s here on this campus. My question to all of you would be: Are you seeking out opportunities to have conversations with these people to understand how their experiences are different from yours, especially being at an American university? You can learn so much just by having conversations in an intentional reaching out to people,” he said.

Q. How do I sell my “soft” skills as a humanities grad?
A. “It’s vital you develop real skill sets. I consider French a technical skill. I think it’s easy, especially when we’re in school, to think that the only real skill sets we need to acquire are, like, business acumen or being a good marketer. There are so many technical skills (in the humanities) that are very valuable in your careers. "Also, think differently about ‘What are technical skills?’ and how can they add value. There are technical skills that come from doing critical theory and the ability to deconstruct problems. I think it’s a willingness to be self-taught and show an intellectual curiosity.”

Q. What’s a good path toward a job with Amazon?
A. “Be open to opportunities that may not seem like the thing you want to do for the rest of your life, or something that’s cool and sexy, but there’s something to be learned in every experience. Keep your mind open.”

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Alumni who lunched with CHaSS

Cami Boehme - Journalism, 2000
Entrepreneur and CEO, Path One Group

Nathaniel Boehme - Sociology, Psychology, 2007
LGBTQ veterans coordinator, Oregon Dept. of Veterans
Kim Brackett - Political Science, 1995
Owner/operator of Brakett Ranches

Dion’Jay Brookter - Communication Studies, 2006
San Francisco Police Commission member, youth advocate

Amanda Butterfield - Journalism, 2000
Director of PR, Woodbury Corp.

Matt Clewett - Law & Constitutional Studies, 2018
Public policy director, Salt Lake Board of Realtors

Matt Dawson - French, 2008
Talent Development Manager, Amazon

Nick Demas - MS History, 2013
Team lead for contractors and vendors, Instructure

Paige Frame - English, 2007
President, McKinnon-Mulherin Inc.

Scott Ficklin - Creative Writing, 2010
Consular officer, U.S. Embassy in Korea

Therese Anderson Grinceri - English, 1996
TV producer, BBC1

Justin Huff - Economics, 2002
SL Board of Realtors

Allie Jurkatis - Journalism, 2014
Freelance writer and editor

Ben Kolendar - Philosophy, 2010
Dep. director, Salt Lake City Dept. of Economic Development

Amy Nelson - JCOM/Public Relations, 2014
Communication director, Sandy Area Chamber of Commerce

Ann Norman - History, 1999
General manager for Africa, Pioneer Energy

Nathan Putnam - Philosophy, 2007
CEO, Monumetric

Bree Smith - Communication Studies, 2015
Recruiter, Plurasight

Tim Stewart - Political Science, 1996
Lobbyist for oil and gas industry

Jacob Turner - Spanish, Psychology, 1997
Director, Citigroup Global Markets Asia