Creating Experience

BY Amy Roberts

The job market today is filled with available, entry-level positions that require minimum experience. This makes finding work difficult for recent graduates. A key component to overcoming this hurdle is by being an autonomous student. Professors can only teach so much in the short 50 to 75 minute time frame they are given with their students two to three times a week. Students have to be willing to acquire skills outside of the classroom to make up for the experience they lack when entering the workforce.

Chris Finley, a recent University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) graduate, left UAB last spring with a degree in Professional Writing and Public Discourse with a minor in Linguistics. When asked about his job search Chris replied, "[I] put my resume on several job-searching websites. Applied to 75 jobs to only receive three call backs and two interviews. Everyone wants experience."

Fortunately, Chris found employment with a young, quickly growing company called Zero RPM, a business who specializes in creating idle mitigation systems for vehicles. Chris was hired as the Technical Writer for Zero RPM after producing a professional portfolio to show shareholders. The portfolio Chris put together consisted of various writing samples from literary analyses to recommendation reports and a video presentation he created for a Visual Rhetoric course during his final semester at UAB. The first few items are all pieces any Professional Writing graduate can include in their portfolio, but the video showed Chris' future employer his versatility.

Graduates today not only have to worry about filling the gap created by their lack of experience, but also setting themselves apart from others competing for the same job who may, or may not, have the experience companies are looking for. In Chris' case, the video presentation he included showcased his diverse set of skills. For this final assignment in Visual Rhetoric, students created presentations including their definition of visual rhetoric, and then presented examples defending their definition. The professor, Dr. Bacha, introduced students to a variety of presentation tools, one of which was a screen recording program accessible for free during a trial period. Chris chose to take on Dr. Bacha's challenge and created a video after having spent hours of personal time learning how to use the trial free software. Then, he figured out how to overlay the screencast with the audio of his presentation script. All of the time spent outside of the classroom acquiring these skills proved to be well spent when the company who hired him asked him during the interviewing process if he would be able to create a video showcasing their products.

Though some of the software Chris lists as tools he uses

Chris Finley at Spring 2013 graduation

every day sound familiar to some Professional Writing students, like Adobe Creative Suite and Microsoft Office, many he has had to learn for the first time. Those include Solid Edge 2D, a drafting tool which allows users to design 3D models, Formstack, an online tool used to create virtually any type of form and overlay logos with no prior coding knowledge required, and Sitewrench, a tool used to create and maintain websites. Chris says he learned about these new resources through research he did on his own time. He says his bosses give him a task objective and more often than not he researches new software for completing each. Other than coworkers and Google, Chris says he watches YouTube videos to learn how to work with new products.

With the projects given to him by his bosses, Chris is also faced with the job of having to learn the company jargon. Zero RPM is a company that develops units to conserve fuel by allowing various car systems to run without the engine. Chris is currently working on a project "redesigning the wiring schematic to show how systems work in correlation with pre-existing electronics in a 2013 Ford F550 for Nevada Energy." This is not exactly an assignment taught in EH 404: Technical Writing, but Chris says he has created a personal dictionary to assist with learning the language.

During the break between semesters, consider brushing up, or engaging in document design software. Research popular programs being using by current writers in a desired field. Play with various freeware found on the internet, like Gimp or Scribus. Professional Writers, Technical Writers especially, pay much attention to document formats. Leaf through graphic design books for inspiration. Create mock drafts of potential documents for a company of interest. Start compiling writing samples and past assignments to

Though there is still much to learn, Chris enjoys his work

include in a professional portfolio. Students graduating next spring should start, if they have not already, thinking about how they intend to use their degree. Chris reflects on the days leading up to and after graduation saying, "Graduation puts you sky high to immediately be knocked back down to reality." Upcoming graduates need to prepare themselves for the reality.

Companies want experienced employees for a reason. Chris agrees saying companies take risks hiring employees with a lack of experience. Graduates entering the job market have to understand it costs an employer more time and money to teach someone how to perform tasks. They can attempt to overcome the experience void by showing an ability, and willingness, to learn more after graduation. Students should also consider researching tools of the employer's trade. When applying for jobs, go beyond researching what a company does and the requirements of a job, but look into how tasks are most likely run. This is the sort of prior knowledge employers will be looking for in applicants. Education does not stop once the diploma is handed over, but rather it has barely begun.

Chris adds one final piece of advice to undergraduates "Be prepared for anything. Demands are high and requests can come at any time of the day or night. It's primarily R&D (research and development) so things are changing constantly. You cannot have thin skin because you're never right the first time. The rewards are great but so are the expectations. Be humble because there are millions of people looking for the same thing as you. Stay focused and dedicated and your time will come."