



Graduates from Dalhousie University's Faculty of Management pose outside the Dalhousie Arts Centre after their graduation ceremony. Photo credit: Bruce Bottomley, Dalhousie University

# Working it out

Commerce grads says mandatory work terms give them a jump on career success

By Stephen Kimber

**I**t is a sweetly sunny late May day in Halifax, the morning after yet another night before on the streets of Montreal where police arrested 518 students in another night of demonstrations against the Quebec government's planned tuition fee increases.

Today's newscasts carry sobering word that Hewlett Packard, the American-based multinational technology company, will lay off 27,000 of its 350,000 workers, the "largest payroll purge in its 73-year history." No one yet knows for sure how the cuts will play out at HP's 28 offices in Canada.

Later this morning in Ottawa, federal Human Resources Minister Diane Finley is scheduled to announce new Employment Insurance rules that will make it harder for the unemployed – including the educated, young unemployed, whose unemployment rate now tops 14 per cent – to turn down jobs that are below their skill levels, or pay less than their last position, or don't offer good working conditions.

Yesterday's Globe and Mail blog asked readers to weigh in on the question: "Are today's youth worse off or just lazy and entitled?"

But here at the Rebecca Cohn Arts Centre on the leafy campus of Dalhousie University, such questions – and realities – seem far away. It is graduation day for the 195 members of the Bachelor of Commerce Class of 2012.

Outside the entrance to the auditorium where the graduates' families and friends will gather, booths have been set up to peddle memories – grad rings, yearbooks, photos, frames to showcase newly minted degrees – and celebratory flowers.

Inside, there is the usual pomp and circumstance. The grads, who come from all over – from Carroll's Corner, Nova Scotia, to Calgary, Alberta, from Harbour Island in the Bahamas to Homs, Syria, from Chang Sha in the Peoples' Republic of China to Katmandu in Nepal and Accra in Ghana – walk up on stage one by one, all dressed in their academic gowns with a fringe of robin's-egg blue around their white silk B.Comm hoods.

At one end, they hand the recipe cards with their names and specialties (Accounting, Finance, Marketing, Entrepreneurship) to the school's director who announces their name and accomplishment to the audience. Then, decked out in everything from sneakers to open-toed sandals to too-high-for-walking heels, they walk, prance, dance, shuffle and strut to centre stage where the university's chancellor, Fred Fountain, waves his magic cap over their bowed heads, welcoming them into the ranks of the degreed. Finally, it's off to the other end of the stage where they pick up their actual degrees, pause for photographs and then walk back down the stairs and into the hugs, high fives and flashes of family photographers. Next...



But it isn't just the usual bubbling, first-day-of-the-rest-of-your-life graduation-day excitement that is keeping darker thoughts of the uncertain outside world at bay.

The confidence of these Dal Commerce grads is hard-earned.

Among them, the members of today's graduating class have already held at least 585 jobs. They've worked for major employers like Scotiabank, Ernest & Young, Frito Lay Canada and Cossette Communications; at government agencies like the Canada Revenue Agency and ACOA; and at non-profits like the Sisters

of Charity and Make-A-Wish Foundation. Some have even run their own businesses.

Better, 70 per cent of those graduates available for employment (almost a quarter of them plan to continue their education, travel or are otherwise off the job market) already have real, paying jobs lined up for after they graduate.

What sets these students apart is that they are graduating from Canada's only accredited, four-year, university-level mandatory business co-op program.

Maureen Drysdale, one of two researchers at the University of Waterloo

engaged in a six-year study of 10,000 Canadian students, reports that co-op students not only get better grades in school but they will also "earn the highest salaries and get the most prestigious jobs after graduation compared with their non-co-op peers."

These graduates owe much of their good fortune today – and in the future – to their choice to combine their academic education with a series of paid work terms. They also owe a debt of gratitude to a couple of guys with a passion for business and business education.



Erin Sullivan (shown here with parents Charlene and Paul Sullivan) says the confidence and skills she gained from her commerce co-op program were key to her success in landing a coveted job with Pepsico Canada. Photo: Julé Malet-Veale

## SAVVY SULLIVAN

**Erin Sullivan** credits her co-op education with helping her win her first full-time job at Pepsico Canada's New Grad program in head-to-head competition with more than two dozen other newly-degreed rivals.

It wasn't because she did her work term at Pepsico. Or even another major corporation. Not even close. Sullivan, in fact, did her co-op terms in government – at ACOA's Moncton office – and at non-profits – the Sisters of Charity and Symphony Nova Scotia.

But by the time she made it to the final round of the Pepsico hiring process – three grueling, competitive days of interviews, tests and assignments in Toronto – "I just felt that much more confident going into the interviews because I could draw on real experiences and not just what I learned in the classroom."

Originally from Moncton, she chose Dal's Commerce Co-op not only because she could get real-life work experience through the co-op but also because Dal was one of the few programs that offered an international business major. While international business majors take the

same core courses as other commerce students, they also study everything from international finance and political science to "cultural understanding."

Her first work term was in Moncton – "I could live at home" – in the international trade and development department at ACOA, creating a database of information about trade shows and missions, as well as surveying participating companies about their experiences. But the real lesson from that work term, she says, was in learning to deal with a "difficult boss. This person had been in the role for a long time and had very clear ideas about how things should be done. At first, I thought this is going to be a really, really tough four months. But I learned. And it was a valuable experience."

She found her second job – in the Finance department of the Sisters of Charity religious order – through the university's MyCareer web site. "I got to do everything from banking and paying bills to serving on a committee giving out bursaries."

She spent her third work term at Symphony Nova Scotia as part of

Dalhousie's five-year-old National Mentoring Program, an innovative scheme in which a corporation contributes the equivalent of the student's co-op salary to a charitable organization so it can hire the student for a needed project while the corporation provides mentoring to the student.

"I revamped [SNS's] merchandising," Sullivan explains. "They were selling merchandise but they had no system and they didn't have the time to develop one themselves. I created a system to track sales and gave them an easy-to-use inventory system. While I was doing that, I could consult with my mentor [Claudette Porter, the vice president of Finance at Nova Scotia Power, the sponsoring company] whenever I needed help." She laughs. "It was crazy busy."

As if her three work terms didn't keep her busy enough, Sullivan arranged to do a semester abroad at the University of Hull in Scarborough, England. "It was complicated," she admits. She had to arrange to take some of her Dal commerce classes online in order to graduate at the same time as her peers. "But it was the best experience of my undergrad degree," she says, "especially for someone majoring in international business."

Oh, right. That. Although Sullivan will be starting her career at Pepsico more locally and prosaically – during their first six months of on-the-job training, new hires learn, among other skills, to drive delivery trucks and stack store shelves so they'll know the business from the bottom up – Pepsico is an international company "and the international opportunities are endless."



Co-op education gave You-jeen Cho the opportunity to experience several types of careers – before she graduated. Shown here on convocation day with proud parents, Joon Cho and Sue Na. Photo: Julé Malet-Veale

## CHO ON THE GO

**Co-ops changed** You-jeen Cho's life. Twice.

During the summer before her final year at C.P. Allen High School in Bedford, Nova Scotia, she did a co-op placement at the Four Points by Sheraton Hotel in Halifax. "I'd been planning to study chemistry at university," she recalls, "but then I discovered finance and accounting." She liked accounting so much she "totally switched" gears in Grade 12, taking every business and economics course on offer so she'd be ready to apply to business school.

She chose Dal's commerce program, in large part because of its mandatory co-op. Her major was to be accounting.

But during her first work term as a promotions coordinator at Skills Canada-Nova Scotia – a non-profit that promotes careers in skilled trades to young people – she found herself preparing a presentation to encourage junior and senior high school students to consider the trades.

"It was very interactive," she recalls, "with a little game to keep the students from dozing, and projects like making their own comics with graphic designers, or building a bird house with carpenters." After presenting the plan to the organization's executive director and board of directors, she took the show on the road to schools all over Nova Scotia.

By the time she began her second work term, as an events and special project assistant at Career Management

Services – "It was very exciting but scary," she says, "to be doing your co-op with the people who arrange them" – she'd decided to switch majors to marketing.

She returned to Skills Canada for her third co-op term, this time as a disability services assistant, helping organize Team Canada's contingent to the 2011 International Abilitymics, a trades skills competition to "celebrate and enhance employability skills of persons with disabilities" that took place in Seoul, Korea.

She not only helped fundraise and develop marketing materials for Canada's team, but she also got to use a skill she didn't learn in her co-op program. She served as a translator for the team. Born in Korea, Cho arrived in Canada with her parents when she was in Grade 5. "I could only say hello," she laughs. "If someone asked me my age, I had to count on my fingers."

Though she doesn't have a job lined up yet – and is considering going back to school to pick up some of the hands-on marketer's skills like photography, Photoshop and graphic design that Dal doesn't offer as part of its marketing major – she says she has no regrets about her choice.

"Co-ops," she says, "provide you with a security blanket. You learn how to talk to employers, how to approach a project, and employers see that. It's a tangible asset."

**In 1989**, Dalhousie University's Commerce department had reached a crossroads. Nova Scotia's government-supported university system – more than a dozen, mostly small universities serving a population of less than one million people – was being squeezed by bad economic times. There was political pressure to merge at least some of the universities and eliminate duplication among them.

"Saint Mary's [University] was really pushing to merge our business department in with theirs," remembers Jim McNiven, now an emeritus professor at Dal, then the Commerce department's recently appointed chair. There were those in the upper reaches of Dalhousie's administration, he acknowledges, who would have been happy to go along. "There was a sense that we should be more in the Oxford-Cambridge model: Gentlemen do not indulge in trade. They believed that business wasn't really a core part of the university, that business education was the sort of stuff community colleges should do."

During a how-do-we-distinguish-ourselves, how-do-we-survive faculty retreat in 1989, then-associate dean John Parker proposed the idea of a business co-op degree. "He'd just come back from a family visit to St. John's and he'd seen Memorial's co-op program, and thought it could work for us too," McNiven says.

Parker's proposal was for a mandatory co-op program, meaning that, during the course of their degree, every student – regardless of the state of the economy – would have to line up at least three paid work terms. Why compulsory? "John had talked with the people at Memorial, who'd tried both (elective and mandatory), and they found they had to offer more courses and there was more duplication."

A mandatory co-op program would certainly distinguish Dal among Nova Scotia business schools...

"Faculty was interested," McNiven remembers, "but..."

The Parker proposal required a complete academic retooling, with profs who'd normally had summers free from students suddenly having to teach them too. "But Parker was bound and determined he was going to make this work," McNiven says. "He took it to Dal... To this committee, that committee, then the full committee. In less than a month, he had all the approvals. He talked to a Dal [administration] guy. 'You can't do that,' the guy told him. 'It's done,' Parker said. 'But it takes six months to a year...' 'It's done.'"

Despite that, the university wasn't prepared to foot the bill for establishing a co-op placement office for the rejigged program, so the Commerce department set up its own, with a separate fee tacked on to tuition to cover the costs. The result, says McNiven, was that students felt they had a direct stake in its success. Which meant finding the right person to run the co-op office in its first years became especially critical.

Enter Pierre Vallee, the president of KPMG in Canada. Though he ran one of the country's leading business services

firms and supervised the work of dozens of employees with MBAs and other graduate degrees, Vallee himself didn't have a bachelor's degree.

He wanted to return to school to get his MBA, but most programs – including the one at Dalhousie – required at least an undergrad to get in the classroom door.

There were discreet inquiries. Would Dal waive its requirements just this once? McNiven flew to Toronto where Vallee met him with his “Rolls and his camel coat, and brought me to the Granite Club” where he explained why he wanted to enrol

in Dal's MBA program.

After it was over, McNiven said, “I'll see what I can do.”

Dalhousie eventually agreed to a just-this-once exception and Vallee graduated with his MBA in 1992 – just as the undergraduate co-op program was beginning. “He was really keen on the co-op and he offered to stay for a year to run it,” McNiven explains, then pauses. “Just think about it. The president of KPMG? What does his Rolodex look like? He was calling up his old friends and saying, ‘Look we have this student...’”



Spencer Gossen spent one of his three co-op placements working in the family business: I.M.P. Group International. Left to right: Dorothy Rowe (grandmother), Ken Rowe (grandfather and I.M.P. Group founder), David Gossen (father), Spencer Gossen and Julie Rehemtulla (mother). Photo: Julé Malet-Veale

## GOLDEN GOSSEN

**Spencer Gossen** already has his future mapped out. This fall, he'll be joining KPMG's audit department – where he spent his first co-op work term two years ago – while he prepares to earn his Chartered Accountant designation. Within four to five years, he wants to go to Harvard (“I'd love to do an MBA there”) and eventually become a manager in a major business enterprise.

Business, he says with passion, “is my passion.”

When I ask him where that passion comes from, he first mentions his parents. “They're both executive types, and listening to them talk about business was like getting a lifelong MBA just sitting around the dinner table. And my grandfather too,” he adds. “He's always been a role model as a person and as a businessperson.”

Who's your grandfather?

He pauses, becomes sheepish. “I don't know how to say this without

sounding like I'm bragging...” he stammers, then says: “Ken Rowe.”

Having the well-known entrepreneur and philanthropist – whose name graces the building where you study – as your grandfather is more blessing than curse, Gossen says quickly, but it inevitably creates “assumptions. It would be too terrible to say you have a target on your back, but people do judge you.” He shrugs. “You just have to do what you do and hope, through hard work, other people will see who you are and what you can do.”

Gossen's own hard work has produced a stellar 4.0 GPA.

He says he chose Dalhousie's commerce co-op for all sorts of reasons – he could live at home, his older brother Trevor was a fourth-year student when he arrived on campus and, of course, “Dal has a great reputation” – but his main reason for choosing the program was because “I wanted to be able to

sit here at the end of my degree with 12 months' worth of work experience behind me.”

He has no regrets. After work terms at KPMG, Emera and as a “junior financial analyst” at IMP – the family business his grandfather founded and his father and mother now help run – he is not only graduating with a job but also a clear plan.

“My CA program starts with Tax Technical two weeks after grad; I start at KPMG in their audit group October 1st.”

While he acknowledges that life – “marriage, family, you know” – could derail his current carefully thought-through future dreams, he expects – hopes – he'll end up in the family business one day. “I might want to work somewhere else for a while, a short break-out, but I think it will pull me back in. Business is what I want to do and [the family] business is where I want to be.”

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***All that bouncing back and forth  
between academic training and real-  
world experience helps make what  
students learn in class more real.***

Thanks to Parker's persistence and Vallee's Rolodex, Dalhousie's new Commerce Co-op became an instant success.

It hasn't looked back.

On November 24, 2011, in fact, current faculty, staff, students and co-op employers gathered at the new Rowe Management Building on campus to celebrate 20 years of the co-op program under a banner that read: "10,000 Co-op Successes."

"When I saw that sign," McNiven says today, "it brought a tear to my eye. I wish John and Pierre had been there to see it."

Pierre Vallee died in 2008; John Parker in 2010.

"We'd rather you didn't use the word 'placements,'" Robert Wooden, the acting director of Dalhousie's Career Management Services, which oversees the actual co-ops, tells me. Calling co-op jobs "placements," he says, makes it appear as if the university is placing students into positions. The truth is students are responsible for landing their own co-op jobs. "We'd prefer you called them 'work terms.' We teach them to fish – as well as provide them with a few fish," he jokes.

Career Management Services – which evolved out of Dal's original commerce co-op office and is now responsible for four different business-related co-op and internship programs – may not place students in jobs but it does everything but.

During their first three semesters on-campus, students – in addition to their academic classes – learn job search skills from résumé writing to interviews. They write test-drive cover letters that get marked and edited long before they have to write their first for-real ones.

When it comes time to apply for their initial work term – which normally starts in January of their second year – students can check out MyCareer.dal.ca, a Dalhousie web portal where they can browse co-op and other job possibilities.

Employers wanting to post work-term positions must be vetted by one of Career Management Services' six subject specialists (banking, marketing, etc...).

Students with connections – or chutzpah enough – can line up jobs themselves, of course, though those must still be approved by their supervisor. "We have to make sure it will be a good learning experience," explains Wooden.

Students alternate work terms with academic semesters, including during the summers, for the middle two years of their four-year program before returning to school full-time for their final year.

All that bouncing back and forth between academic training and real-world experience helps make what students learn in class more real. "We might all know what a supply and demand curve is," graduating student Jason Wong, who helped raise \$800,000 for the Make-A-Wish Foundation during his final work term, told Dalhousie News, "but learning how to use it to maximize growth and efficiency is equally as important."

And those work terms often lead to full-time post-graduation jobs. Michelle Callaghan, KPMG's senior audit manager who has hired a number of this year's graduates, describes a work term as "a four-month [job] interview." HSBC Bank of Canada Senior Account Manager Bruce Rutherford says not only are Dal co-op students "second to none," but he adds tellingly, "all my staff were once co-op students."

As the graduates prepare to walk out of the auditorium this morning and off into their futures, there is, inevitably, an inspirational speaker – in this case, honorary degree recipient Annette Verschuren, a "Cape Breton farm girl" who grew up to be the president of Home Depot Canada – and you can too – to tell them that all things are possible.

Especially if you graduate with a degree – and work experience. | ABM