Your Courses, Your Activities, and Your Career

As you think about your classes and how you spend your time in college, many of you are focused on how your experience at CWRU will translate into a fulfilling and, let’s face it, sufficiently lucrative career. According to a recent op-ed column titled “How to Get a Job at Google” by Thomas L. Friedman, best known for his book *The World is Flat*, the key to getting a job goes beyond your GPA and subject matter expertise. Based on his conversation with Laszlo Bock, the senior vice president of people operations (HR) at Google, Friedman reports that

> the world only cares about – and pays off on – what you can do with what you know (and it doesn’t care how you learned it). And in an age when innovation is increasingly a group endeavor, it also cares about a lot of soft skills – leadership, humility, collaboration, adaptability and loving to learn and re-learn. This will be true no matter where you go to work. *(The New York Times, February 23, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/23/opinion/sunday/friedman-how-to-get-a-job-at-google.html?ref=columnists)*

Neither I nor our Career Center would endorse all implications of Friedman’s column. For example, we continue to think that completing a college degree and earning good grades will serve you well. Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, and Mark Zuckerberg have done very well without a college degree, but there are huge numbers of college dropouts who have fared considerably less well; we just don’t know about them! At the same time, Friedman’s column and the advice garnered from Google tell us a great deal about how to choose courses and allocate your time while in college. Here are two specific examples related to leadership (which I sometimes refer to as citizenship, i.e. knowing when to step in as a leader and when to step back), adaptability, and humility:

> What we care about is, when faced with a problem and you’re a member of a team, do you, at the appropriate time, step in and lead. And just as critically, do you step back and stop leading, do you let someone else? Because what’s critical to be an effective leader in this environment is you have to be willing to relinquish power. *(Bock speaking)*

> What we’ve seen is that the people who are most successful here, who we want to hire, will have a fierce position. They’ll argue like hell. They’ll be zealots about their point of view. But then you say, ‘here’s a new fact,’ and they’ll go, ‘Oh, well, that changes things; you’re right.’ *(Bock again)*

The so-called “soft skills” can be hard to acquire and hone. As you choose courses, think about which ones will give you the opportunity to practice group work and will force you to think about a problem from various angles and make a strong case for your point of view. You will find some of these courses in your major, but your choice of breadth courses can be especially important. Helping students develop and practice these skills is a stated goal of the SAGES Program. But it is not enough simply to take these courses. While enrolled and having these experiences, be self-conscious about what you are doing, beyond trying to earn a good grade. And, later, go back and reflect on that experience and the series of experiences you have had over time. How has your leadership style developed? What about your presentation skills and your ability to work as part of a team?
This career advice also speaks to the importance of balancing your courses with co-curricular and extracurricular experiences. These settings, such as participation on an athletic team or as part of a music or theater production, an internship or co-op experience, or contributing at various levels to a student or community-based organization, can provide opportunities to practice and advance your “soft skills.” When planning your courses for next semester, you may want to leave time for these other activities.

Key in all of this is learning how to describe these skills to potential employers. That’s where the Career Center can be especially helpful. They can help you translate your experiences and skills into language on your resume. They can also help with mock interviews so that you get practice talking about the full range of experiences you have had in classroom and out-of-classroom settings, drawing on the best examples for the story you wish to tell about yourself.

None of this needs to be painful along the way. I encourage you to choose courses and other activities that are fun (while meeting requirements, of course!). You will happily put time and energy into these and, thus, are more likely to perform well. And that will help convince employers about your ability to do well for them also.

Let me know what you think. You can write to me at jeffrey.wolcowitz@case.edu.