Alumni Spotlight

This month’s Spotlight features Joanna, a former English major who’s now using her creative talent to create campaigns and presentations for a nation-wide company.

Joanna Reyes-Burns:
Corporate Communication Specialist
PennyMac

What are you up to now, post-graduation?

I do corporate communications for Pennymac, a large mortgage company. My department handles the communications that need to go out to the company’s locations nation-wide. I make videos and presentations that get played every week at all our sites on their TVs. They’re informative presentations for the employees across the country to stay up to date on company news and reminders. Every week I have a schedule for creating new slides and getting them vetted by others in the department.

We also create campaigns and part of my job is thinking them up and executing them. I created this “Travel Tales” series where I solicited travel stories. We developed a movie that used pins on a map as a fun visual that anchored the different stories. Another task I’ve been assigned is designing wall decals for all our different sites, using our map and mascots. I worked with a graphic designer to create the art, got it sent to a wall decal company, then worked with people at the sites to get me blueprints so I could figure out where these decals could go in locations I’d never been. It can be a challenge because I’ll get tasked with something and without necessarily getting a lot of guidance or instruction on how to get it done, so problem-solving is a necessary skill. But I get to be creative and I know that the whole company is looking at what I’m making, which I really value.

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For my job, creativity and communication skills are essential. I also can really MacGyver Powerpoint, which was a big selling point when I applied. You can make movies on PowerPoint, y’all!

How did you get to where you are?

I actually came to UCSB after the army, so I was about twenty-five when I transferred in. Toward the end of high school, I got accepted to Cal Poly SLO. I had applied only to that school because I didn’t have enough money to apply to more. My parents weren’t going to pay for college, but had enough money that I couldn’t get loans, and I lost out on that option. One day, the army came into my classroom. This was in Long Beach, California. In Fairfax County, Virginia, where I’d come from, it was richer and the military only got a little table in the cafeteria and you had to go up to them. But in Long Beach, they came into our classrooms and made presentations. I’m grateful that happened, but I notice inequality in things like that. They made a presentation where they said, “You’ll have a job right after high school! We’ll pay for everything!” I had moved in with my aunt and around tax time, my dad and my aunt were fighting over who could claim me as a tax deduction. It made me feel terrible because none of them were doing anything for me. I was sleeping on a mattress on the floor. So when the military came, it all made sense to me. I was like, “Nobody’s ever claiming me again. I’m claiming myself.”

I never thought I’d end up in this line of work. Ever since I was sixteen, I wanted to be a high school English teacher, but then had the idea that I should do accounting because it sounded more practical. But that didn’t sit right with me after awhile and I finally allowed myself to pursue English at UCSB. My plan was to do the UCSB Education MA program after undergrad, but I missed the deadline and ended up going to USC to get my master’s in teaching. It was an unfortunate time to graduate with a degree in teaching—teachers were getting laid off and that’s what everyone in that field was talking about—pink slips, pink slips, pink slips.

My teaching and English background helped me get a job with the Boys and Girls Club over the summer, but it didn’t pay enough long term. Next, I was a behavior therapist for children with autism—again, the education degree got me that position. That also wasn’t quite the right fit. I moved into a position as an executive assistant and grant writer—my English background lent itself well to being competitive for that position. That also wasn’t quite the right fit. I moved into a position as an executive assistant and grant writer—my English background lent itself well to being competitive for that position. I liked the writing but not the administrative work so transitioned to Fielding Graduate University to manage several grant-sponsored programs. I liked what Fielding stood for. The liberal education I’d gotten at UCSB and USC led

“I needed to get on a path that was more fulfilling for me and budget management wasn’t it.”
Would Communication have been a more fitting major? Maybe for someone else. I would never trade my English degree for anything. I learned so much. I got to read a lot. I got to interact with different people and talk about deep things I know my husband, an accountant, never talked about during his education, you know? It made me a better human. People worry about what careers a major will lead to. Well, my degree gave me a lot of flexibility when my career field was undergoing hard times and has helped me get to a lot of interesting places. I definitely haven’t been short of work.

What was the best thing you did as an undergrad to help you get to where you are?

Talking with my professors. Maybe because I was an older student, I was comfortable taking advantage of office hours. I made a strong enough impression that I got an award at graduation for student achievement in the English program. Only about fifteen students got it. That gave me confidence, feeling like I could make a meaningful impression. And it gave me practice for later on when I’d need to talk to my supervisors and stand out.

What do you wish you had known while you were in undergrad?

I don’t know if I would have done anything differently had I known what I do now. The changes that happened to the education system at that time were really out of my hands and I’d done everything.

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that I knew to do to become a teacher. I’ve considered whether a minor would have been a good choice, but not minoring allowed me to sit in lectures I actually wanted to hear and learn things I actually wanted to learn. Having the breadth of courses exposed me to things I wouldn’t have been exposed to otherwise.

**What was the best thing about being a Gaucho?**

There was a really healthy vibe to the campus. I don’t know if it’s like this at other UCs, but UCSB had a lot of focus on environmental conservation. People rode bikes. You had this gorgeous place to breathe in some fresh air. It was a time in my life where, for the most part, I could actually relax. I could sleep in. My only responsibility was to go to class. And there was this intellectual energy of lectures in the big halls that felt exciting and meaningful.

Any final words of wisdom for the current Gaucho generation?

I think it’s ridiculous to expect young people to already know what they want to do. Think about it. You graduate when you’re twenty-two? You can still go to more school after that! You can get a job, and if you don’t like that, you can get another job! I had to get it right because instead of school, I was in the military, but twenty-two? You have so much time. You’re young. You can figure it out later.

So in the meantime, learn something you enjoy. You’ll never be upset when you learn what you want to learn. Ever. You’ll figure it out financially. But it’s not cool when you’re unhappy. Maybe that’s just part of who I am. Some people, when they’re unhappy, just kind of stay put. I’ve never been that kind of person and that’s worked in my favor.

Joanna welcomes UCSB students to contact her via email for mentorship and with questions about corporate communication. Inquiries about open positions will not be responded to.

joannapaula.bURNS@gmail.com

Facebook.com/AskJoeGaucho
@AskJoeGaucho
@AskJoeGaucho