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UT Program Is Helping Collegians Find Careers

By Laura Pereyra

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The dialogue surrounding whether a college education is worth the investment in an era of trillion-dollar student debt is pretty mainstream. There are education experts who have expressed concern and regret that they can no longer tell their students to be unafraid of their futures, because following linear paths leads to dead ends beside a pile of student debt for college graduates.

“In the end, flexibility and a healthy dollop of optimism will be required of this new crop of college-degree holders, whose aspirations

may outstrip opportunities” New York University Professor Pamela Newkirk wrote in the Chronicle of Higher Education recently.

But are those aspirations really outstripping the opportunities? Is there that lack of optimism now? Or might it actually be that students are finding avenues to create those opportunities for themselves?

The University of Texas’ Intellectual Entrepreneurship Consortium, an effort and game changer that pairs undergrads with graduate students and real-work internship opportunities, is guiding students toward self-discovery, ownership, and accountability of their higher education. Consequentially, students are maximizing their college experience and tuition dollars.

At its inception, the program aimed to help students get an interdisciplinary education, and quickly thereafter the effort evolved into empowering students to make the most of their college experience by exposing them to graduate work, other fields of work outside of their area of study, and provided a forum in which to design their own learning experiences that melded their passions to their academic work.

One of the consortium’s programs, the pre-grad internship, pairs students with a graduate school mentor and simultaneously helps them take up an internship or pursue academic research alongside their mentors. The program has made a huge impact with first-generation students by exposing them to a graduate education and academic research opportunities many of them did

not know existed prior to joining the program. Approximately 50 to 60 percent of the consortium's pre-graduate interns are minorities or students who are the first in their families to attend college. The program's impact shows how important it is for all students to carefully reflect the ways in which they want to translate their education investment into long-running careers in their fields of choice.

First-generation students at UT are enjoying the opportunity to maximize their college experience as well as consider grad school with the Intellectual Entrepreneurship program. Civil engineering student Sonia Trujillo explained, "As a first-generation student attending college, sometimes it is overwhelming to even consider this idea." Students are finding ways to create opportunities for themselves that translate into productive and successful careers.

Some students find that they want to go to grad school, but others realize that their passions may not require a graduate degree. Others, like social work pre-grad intern Aida Prazak, find that the program helped them make college tuition dollars count. Prazak put it this way: "By being paired up with mentors who have been through the process, we take advantage of their experience and efficiently minimize our learning curve which increases our intellectual profit margin. This ultimately maximizes our tuition dollars. If it were not for the IE program, I would still be pursuing graduate programs in public policy or law, when that really is not where my heart is. I was able to discover this in one semester as opposed to several years — the ultimate in efficiency."

"It's about owning their education," said Richard Cherwitz, who founded the Intellectual Entrepreneurship Consortium. He emphasized that education should be who you are, and it seems that with increasing tuition rates and student loan debt, students are benefiting from programs that create incubators for students to achieve both academic and non-academic endeavors in an efficient manner. In the end, the student is much better off getting the bang for their buck. They know that they have designed their own education with the opportunities to leverage their experience to yield the career he/she desires.

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Pereyra, a 2010 UT graduate, is a communications associate for NerdScholar, which provides fee scholarship search, student loan calculator and college comparison tools.