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Hurtado: Intern program helps build 'citizen-scholars'

UT offers students chance at discovery before graduation

By Ana Lucia Hurtado | June 28, 2013

Several life-changing moments stand out as I reflect on my journey from immigrating to the U.S. at the age of 5 to graduating from Harvard Law School last year.

Among them are my parents' decision to leave Peru, becoming a mother at the young age of 19 and stumbling across the Intellectual Entrepreneurship (IE) program at The University of Texas at Austin.

The program provides mentorships and internships that let students take charge of their education, discovering how to leverage knowledge for social good - to be "citizen-scholars."

It helped me understand my course work in terms of the direction I wanted to take in life - and set me on a path of my own choosing, very different than what my family or I had expected.

My journey began when my parents left Peru because of overwhelming political turmoil. I was always a strong student, exploring engineering and medicine and enrolling at Duke University, where I would have likely followed that route.

But then I confronted the greatest challenge of my life: becoming a young mother.

Facing an unintended pregnancy, I could no longer approach my future passively. I recognized that my choices would impact not only my life, but also that of my son.

Hence the search to find my "calling" resumed in earnest.

I transferred to the University of Texas and stumbled upon the IE Consortium and its pre-graduate school internship. It was unlike any other internship.

Working at the Children's Rights Clinic at UT's law school, I was encouraged her to think like an "intellectual entrepreneur" - to discover my passion and design a road map for the career I envisioned.

With a faculty supervisor and graduate student mentor, I got an insider's look at the legal profession. I reflected on my experiences and the profession to which I aspired. For the first time, I closely examined the academic culture in which I studied, directing my own course and collaborating with my supervisors to create the most enriching experience possible.

This experiment in intellectual entrepreneurship dispelled many myths I held about the legal profession, showing me that being a good lawyer and a good mother were not mutually exclusive.

By bringing together my personal, academic and professional interests in one class, I discovered and owned my education; I learned the real meaning of a discipline and how academic expertise transforms lives - my own and others.

Not surprisingly, IE, an initiative in place at UT since 1996, shows great promise for increasing diversity in graduate education and for enhancing the education of undergraduates.

Almost 75 percent of IE interns are first-generation, economically disadvantaged or underrepresented minorities, many of whom want to put their education to work in the community.

The pre-graduate internship program that I was part of and which UT has offered since 2003 has helped nearly 2,00 students. The opportunity that IE offers students to discern otherwise unobserved connections between academe and their personal and professional commitments is especially attractive - just as it was for me.

IE's principal achievement is enabling students to understand academic disciplines from the ground up. Students are given an experiential space where they are encouraged to contemplate how they might integrate their personal and professional goals with academic knowledge.

IE transcends the "just do it" mentality of typical internships by allowing students to become anthropologists. During my internship, I reflected upon, questioned and shared what I was learning about myself, academic culture and the value of disciplinary knowledge. What better way to learn than through such entrepreneurial discovery?

This entrepreneurial approach to education addresses one of the greatest concerns raised by students and parents: After amassing a large number of semester credit hours, graduates often don't have a clue about how what they've learned will get them where they want to go - a problem especially significant for underrepresented minority and first-generation students who often want to put their education to work by making connections between academe and their communities.

My IE internship at UT demonstrates that students' educational experiences become more meaningful when you allow and encourage them to become intellectual entrepreneurs.

Students transform their own educations when they discover connections between classroom knowledge and their personal aspirations. Indeed, this might also reduce students' time to complete a degree.

Considering the challenges facing higher education today, the IE program merits considerable attention and ample adoption across this nation's campuses.

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