

City-building Experience Builds Students' Confidence

Image



Practical, meaningful skills and new perspectives gleaned on the side of city-building experiment

While the cofounders of a unique city-building effort in Vancouver talk about its big and far-reaching possibilities, two students who took part in it have a lot to say about what it has done for them in small, deep and lingering ways. They say they walked away with a bolstered sense of confidence in themselves, in a certain set of skills and in a particular way of relating to people around them.

From Creating Effective E-mails

Started seven years ago, [CityStudio Vancouver](#) is a bold, new way to do post-secondary education. Undergrads who participate get to funnel their creative and cognitive energies into designing and implementing experiments that could be turned into potential solutions to real-life, current municipal issues. It's heady stuff. For example, students have come up with and done specific things to help the city reach its "greenest city" goals. The implications for city development are huge.

But when Sarah Barnes talks about her three-month experience with CityStudio Vancouver four years ago, she mentions the tiny, practical skills she learned and practiced – like how to write effective e-mails.

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“It’s actually shocking how something as simple as writing an e-mail can make or break a relationship or a project,” Sarah tells Axiom News from her workplace, beryl, in the U.K. She adds she wonders if she’d have gained these same small, practical skills in other undergrad programs.

To Valuing Listening as a Way to Contribute

Sarah also talks about tweaking the value she places on listening through her experience with CityStudio Vancouver.

“I was the type of person who always wanted to be in the middle of the conversation... I’ve been told my whole life to speak up, to participate and, when given the opportunity, to contribute.”

She describes joining conversations and “throwing in” her two cents, even if they weren’t totally relevant to what was being discussed “just because I had something that I could say.”

The subtle tweak for her was around learning the value of listening and then speaking when she had something to say “that is going to take the conversation further or really contribute to an idea.”

“In one semester I went from being... a person who just always wanted to talk,” Sarah recalls, “to a person who would think very carefully about how I contributed in a conversation.”

To Hosting Stakeholder Meetings

Now a junior project manager of a \$1.6-billion light rapid transit project in Vancouver, Angela Jarvis vividly recalls the time she got to host a stakeholder meeting as an undergrad.

“I got to draft up designs on the table, I had the city manager in active transportation sitting beside me, and at the end of that meeting, he gave sign off.

“I had never experienced that before.

“I think a lot of young people who are going through these very academically structured programs don’t always know how that translates into the real world,” she adds.

“But this program made me feel like I can actually do this.

“I don’t think I would have landed where I am now if I didn’t have this experience.”

To Relating to Colleagues as Whole Persons

Sarah remembers the first time she heard CityStudio Vancouver cofounder Janet Moore use the expression, “You have to go slow fast.”

“It’s her way of saying, you have to build the relationships first. You have to know how other people work.

“It is about building the relationships and the support.”

Sarah’s cohort with CityStudio Vancouver in 2014 was a tight-knit group of people, all of whom are connected via a Facebook group that is active and engaged to this day.

As with all that she gleaned through her experience, Sarah has gone on to try and recreate what she experienced through the initiative in her life now.

In her workplace, for example, she makes it a weekly “to-do” to socialize with her colleagues, whether that’s having a team lunch or going for drinks. It’s important that it’s weekly, and it’s important that it’s on her calendar, she says.

She’s also made it a practice to check in with how her colleagues are doing as whole persons; she is dedicated to really listening when and if they want to talk.

“That’s definitely a different mentality than I had before starting CityStudio,” she says. “Quite often when you’re in the working world you’re told to keep everyone at an arm’s length... But actually as human beings we need to have that level of support, and it’s okay to share your whole self with people. You don’t have to edit yourself away because you think it might not be work appropriate.”

Angela also says she came to see how focusing on creating strong relationships can be a path to success and a more meaningful life.

“I think I was always an emotionally intelligent person but I also believe that because I was part of a group of 19 (through CityStudio Vancouver), I can be a reference point to others (to say) there are ways to be successful in being collaborative and not so combative,” she says.

She recalls the moment she chose to drop the view that playing the devil’s advocate is the way to draw support and achieve success.

“The energy of being the devil’s advocate doesn’t get us anywhere,” she says now. That epiphany, which happened four years ago, still comes back to her during workplace meetings.

In Order to Make the World a Better Place

The list of small skills and tweaks in perspective that the students acquired through their encounter with CityStudio Vancouver goes on. Sarah talks about honing an approach to design that focuses a large part of one’s attention and energy on understanding a problem “without bias” – before jumping too quickly to a “solution.”

Angela mentions leaving the program with the sense that “I got to be me and be shown how to carve out exactly what I would love to do in this world based on being me.”

Sarah sums what she took away with these words: “The way that Janet and (cofounder) Duane Elverum teach CityStudio, it gets embedded into your character so those lessons are long lasting. They really strengthen a person’s ability to go out and do the work that needs to be done to make the world a better place.”

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