

Grinnell College

## Office of Institutional Research Newsletter

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### Alumni Reflections on Grinnell's Messages about Careers

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#### **Introduction**

After a semester of research focusing on current Grinnell students (published as Issue 3, "A Culture of Confusion: Grinnell's Messages About Careers"), we realized that a study dealing with the opinions of alumni was necessary as well. During Spring semester 1999 we facilitated five focus groups with alumni; one in Grinnell, one in Iowa City, and three in Washington, DC. We interviewed a total of 25 alumni, ranging in class years from '65 to '98. In these groups, we asked alumni about the transition from Grinnell into the "real" world, what they have done since graduating, what they felt Grinnell encouraged and discouraged them to pursue in terms of a career, and how this has affected the course of their post-Grinnell lives. We heard a lot of the same themes in all of the groups, especially from alumni who graduated in the 90's. People who graduated more than 10 years ago made comments that fit less with our research on current students. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes are from 90's alumni.

#### **Further Education**

Alumni felt encouraged to go on to graduate school and reiterated that Grinnell emphasizes learning for learning's sake. Over half of the alumni that we interviewed had gone on to graduate school. They also felt encouraged to work in academia. We heard alumni say that faculty encouraged them to take time off before beginning a real career or going to graduate school.

The implicit message was that there are literally ermine gowns, velvet and coroneted nobility in the world and they all teach at universities. There was a world of ladies and gentlemen but if you wanted to be a player, you wanted to be a university professor, and that was very very strong. —class of '61

I kind of feel that some [older professors] were not particularly encouraging of grad school, where the younger ones were a lot more encouraging.

[Professors] all said that it's a lot of hard work to get through graduate school, it's hard work to get through undergrad, you need a break. They suggested taking a year, two years, or three years, but don't go right away.

I vaguely thought about going to graduate school. The only good advice I got was from my history professor, who told me not to go to history graduate school unless I could get into the very top ones, or else I'd be teaching at a community college somewhere.

When I decided not to pursue academia, I was kind of like "Oh, no that's the end of all my learning," but then I came to the realization that learning never stops.

They always talked about 70% of Grinnell students going on for more education. That stuck in my mind, got to get out of here, got to do something interesting.

I felt a lot of pressure to pursue academics, I think, or at least do post-graduate work, after leaving Grinnell.

Men were encouraged to go to grad school because that was just when the Viet Nam War was heating up and so we were all subject to the draft and trying to get to age 26 if we could. I don't know if Grinnell encouraged it, but we all encouraged each

other and tried to stay out of the draft. —class of '65

I think you end up getting a lot of your information from your advisors. Obviously your advisors are PhDs and have gone to graduate school, and they're not trying to send that message but that's the kind of a message they give because of their experience. What you share most is your experience.

## **Community**

The younger Grinnell alumni in DC emphasized the importance of a Grinnell community. Many thought the most difficult part of the transition was leaving this behind. Many of the DC alumni have formed their own Grinnell community and say that they feel most comfortable around other Grinnellians, or graduates of other similar selective small liberal arts colleges. Part of this is the Grinnell mindset that trains students to be liberal (as opposed to conservative), both politically and socially. Grinnellians are also "trained" to be social activists and involved in their communities, either through work in human services or volunteering. Grinnell fosters the idea of like-mindedness and alumni enjoy being around others who hold similar values and interests as themselves.

I will say that one reason I came to live in [DC] was because I was suffering college withdrawal, as they say. The communal living is what I missed the most.

You could walk down the loggia and pick people up on the way to the bar and you suddenly had a band of friends to go do something with. Out in the big cities you have to make phone calls, you have to see who's available, when they're available, what areas of the city they want to go to, it becomes quite an ordeal. You kind of miss that kind of easy community.

It's nice to have Grinnell people [in DC] that share that experience, even though everyone's Grinnell experience is unique. You know it's really neat to be able to sit down with Grinnellians after a day with people who feel like total strangers and you can talk to them about this professor, that professor, this dorm or what you were doing last year, or what you missed or how you missed sitting down with people and having conversations that meant something, that weren't about people, but were about ideas

A couple of my friends went to Swarthmore, Oberlin, and Smith, and I do find that without sounding elitist or snobbish, that I feel much more comfortable around those people. I think we have more of an instant kinship by having this common experience in terms of being at a small, politically active, politically aware college. Those have been the friends I've usually kept in close touch with as I've moved from situation to situation.

## **Business**

Careers in business and getting an MBA are discouraged, as exemplified by several alumni who received an MBA and were embarrassed to admit it. However, many realized that they could still lead a Grinnell lifestyle while working in business and that social activism and a career in business were not diametrically opposed.

I was one of those people who went to college with no clear idea of what I was going to do afterwards except with a vague idea that I wanted to somehow be involved in business. —class of '87

I wouldn't say I was discouraged [to go into business] by the faculty, at least. But, because business jobs tend to pay more than working for NPR or PBS, I think it was somewhat discouraged on another level.

I took some econ and it clicked. Made sense and, despite the fact that I went to college thinking economics was about money, I came out thinking economics is about choice and why people choose to do what they do. I think that a lot of the economics majors make it through college thinking this is about money, or this is about how people spend their money. But when you go to a place like Grinnell, you look at it on a different level, where it is not just how people spend money but it's how we spend all of the resources.

I'd hate to see us start to have accounting majors and marketing majors and things like that.

I guess the fact that I'd sort of applied to business schools was sort of a mark of shame among some of my friends. And I kept on

trying to tell people, “Yeah, I’m going to business school but I’m going to work in the non-profit sector in government afterwards.” My friends used to joke with me after being out of business school, before I started working, that I actually had a business card and how cool that was, and they would tell their parents, “well look, I know Tom, he has a real job”.

Grinnell students have a previous disposition against sort of the more corporate thing.

A professor always used to advocate that all the lesbian separatists in class ought to go get MBA’s. If they really wanted to change the world that’s where they should do it. If you are trying to advocate change [then] you really need to have people on the inside and people on the outside. The big question is, do you have to sell your soul so much to get on the inside and to get a position of power that at some point you become the thing that you were supposedly fighting against? I think some people do see sort of working on the inside as completely futile.

I can’t imagine wanting to go into business. Not that many people I know went on to do anything that’s going to make them a whole lot of money.

I think if anybody felt like starting a business when I was there it had something to do with using your peers to rid the world of nuclear weapons or something.

I have to say I feel a little guilty saying I have an MBA.

I didn’t know what I wanted to do when I got out. I’ve been wandering ever since and I’m still wandering. But when I got to business school, most of my peers there had been very focused in their careers ever since college. Most of them had more high powered career paths than mine and when they left they certainly pursued more high powered jobs than I did, but I didn’t feel like they were as interesting as myself. I guess, my friends from Grinnell are just so much more interesting than my friends from grad school.

[When I was working for a business] I asked why we couldn’t have all the business customers subsidize all the poor people and the old people. He’s like “I’m going to have to tape a sign in your cubicle that says ‘We are in business to make money.’” I said “Couldn’t we just...?” and he was just like “NO!”. He wouldn’t even let me finish.

## **Grinnell-type People**

We received a lot of feedback that didn’t fit into any of the categories. Many alumni talked about general aspects of Grinnell that covered a variety of issues.

A Grinnell education kind of makes you look the pieces and step back and see if the pieces fit.

I was attracted to Grinnell because I didn’t have a clue as to what I wanted to do. Grinnell was very broad-based, take your time about choosing a major, and no core curriculum and all that stuff. And so I lived, I was the queen of denial. I just assumed that I would magically get a job or something would happen when I graduated.

The people I know from Grinnell, maybe by virtue of being Grinnellians, maybe just the kind of people it attracts or whatever, are a lot less focused on careers and getting ahead and they are a lot more able to take perspective and enjoy themselves and other things.

Just this world view which for [Grinnellians] is more like “do something different, do something new, learn something new about yourself,” whereas with other people it is more like, “this is your little world so stay there, that’s what you know, that’s where you should be.”

I don’t know that skilled labor even belongs on [a list of encouraged or discouraged careers at Grinnell] because they never talk about it. They were a breed apart from people at Grinnell. Grinnell is the stuff of Harry Hopkins, Peter Coyote, Herbie Hancock. That’s who goes to Grinnell, not those who go on and become wage earners. Not those who go on and become manager of the night shift at McDonalds. That’s not a career worthy of a Grinnell grad... I could own my own construction firm and never go back to a reunion. People would be like “He used wood to build houses. That’s not very environmentally safe.” I don’t pay these messages any mind. If I owned my own company I think there would be people at my reunion that would not be happy.

That work is just what I do and I enjoy my job but there are other aspects of my life, and for so many other people, I just wonder what they are going to do about 20 years from now when they stop and look back on their lives and think “gosh, I wish I’d taken

some more risks.”

Joe Wall came out [to DC] as one of his last things before he died. I got to drive him and Al Jones back to the hotel. All Joe could say was that Grinnellians do the most interesting things. That just said it all. –class of ‘86

I go back to Grinnell sometimes and we are a very white school. You just don’t realize it at Grinnell which is great, I think that is wonderful. I never thought of myself as Indian when I was at Grinnell, now I do, very much so. I am very aware of it and Grinnell gave me all the right tools to deal with it. It was a very very interesting transition.

I don’t know very many Grinnell people who are just happy doing their 8-5 jobs and go home and watch TV and go to bed. Most of us try to do things that enrich our lives more.

### **Class Issues**

Class issues were often raised when we asked about making money a priority. Alumni noted that Grinnellians are privileged and many can work in low-paying jobs, intern, or travel after graduating while receiving financial support from their parents. Though many felt money does not have to become a priority in choosing a career, we heard from a number of alumni who felt it was necessary to be able to support themselves directly out of college.

I had to go out and do something that would be noteworthy enough to satisfy the commitment [my parents] made to put me through college, because it was a big financial burden on them. –class of ‘87

The freedom a lot of Grinnell students have of not knowing what they want to do also comes because we are a very rich school. The average first year family income at Grinnell, I think the last time I heard, was \$80,000 a year.

This thing about freedom to have the resources behind being free and floating around, those are actually kind of real out there. I’ve always had this thing about having to keep a roof over my head and keeping myself fed and paying off my student loans which were pretty basic things but the whole financial security thing is actually pretty big with me. Some people don’t have to worry about that.

Some people don’t need to get a job for two months and their parents will support them after they graduate for that first summer and other people their parents are like, “I’m sorry, we’ve supported you.”

I knew whatever I did would be okay and I knew that if I needed to fall back on my parents that they would support me. My parents are by no means rich but I always knew I wasn’t going to be out in the street and I didn’t have to be worrying paycheck to paycheck. On the other hand, I think that when you get outside of Grinnell you feel like you have to have something concrete even if it is not a guaranteed a million dollar paycheck or career goal for the rest of your life.

The thing I felt discouraged to do was talk like I was interested in earning a lot of money. I do think the whole “change the world and help those in need” mentality made making money a secondary priority for most alums for awhile. In my experience that’s because a lot of the Grinnell students I knew are ones who came from fairly well-to-do backgrounds and didn’t need to worry about that.

### **Transitions**

Many alumni said that they felt undirected and unprepared to make the transition after graduating from Grinnell. They didn’t know what they wanted to do career-wise and missed the support they had at Grinnell. Some alumni we talked to were still making the transition and felt confused. Others, who had gotten through the transition years, felt that the confusion of those years didn’t make them value their Grinnell education any less.

It has really been crawling up the ladder one rung at a time, hanging on by my fingernails economically. I would say just the idealism I picked up a lot of at Grinnell was what encouraged me not to give up even if it would have been a lot easier to either go back home or find a decent job that was not in my dream field. On the other hand, when I did get the full-time job on Capitol Hill I hated it. Funny how these things work out, but at least I can say I followed my dreams.

At Grinnell it was a lot easier to change the world around you. In a given week you could meet and discuss what you were going to do to raise AIDS awareness and the next day you could go to Marshalltown and watch kids at DVA and counsel kids at DVA and then a day later you could be giving a presentation to the high school for FEARLESS and then you'd have another meeting for that and you could stop and look back and say "I've done a lot and I feel really good about it." You had control over your schedule. Out here it is more difficult because you are expected to be at work from 9:30 - 5:30 because certain people need part of your time and if you're not there you're letting them down and not fulfilling that aspect of your job but it makes it more difficult to go out and change the world. So changing the world becomes fixing dinner for a couple homeless men once a month or maybe tutoring kids of different age groups once or twice a month and here you look back at the end of the month and you say a year ago I was doing something more.

Whatever happens I know there are a million things out there that will interest me. That I could do regardless of what other people offer to me; I know that it's really important. People keep telling me that I have such a healthy attitude. It doesn't even seem like anything but logical and I didn't even think about that but that's exactly the same mishmash that sent me out of Grinnell.

As a result [of Grinnell] you get people who come out and they are happy to try a little bit of this and a little bit of that. I was an English teacher, I waited tables for awhile, where I think a lot of other people are business, business, business or engineering, engineering, engineering.

I didn't know about law. Didn't know that was where I was going to go. Kind of graduated from school and went "what should I do? I want to do some Indian rights... masters in anthropology? Not so helpful. I need something concrete...ahh, maybe I'll try law. Do I want to be a lawyer? I don't know. Can't hurt to work." Okay. So that's kind of where I am now.

Grinnell students are always doing something great and interesting but it usually takes about 10 years to figure out what they want to do. —class of '86

There was no plan and there was no pressure that you had to have a plan as a senior. Just pick somewhere to go and the pieces will fall in place. You might not have that perfect job today or tomorrow but down the road. —class of '86

[Grinnell] presents you with how to get parties to buy beer. You get this information really easily: everyone collects money at the dining halls for parties if there is going to be alcohol. But nobody ever says, "By the way, your senior year, heads up, before graduation you might want to take some exams if you are thinking about grad school." I look back being a freshmen during college age and it feels like a million years ago already and I can't honestly remember how much I knew to ask. You have to have some assumption that incoming students don't know the right questions to ask and you have to help them.

You know it's okay to take that ride while you're at Grinnell and everyone supports you being able to learn all of these different things and it is a phenomenal thing. And for that year or two of transition when it sucks, you really resent what Grinnell is doing. And then as soon as you get somewhere you go, "You know what--my whole life is going to be so much better off because of this" and I feel like I wouldn't change anything. I tell people this all the time, Grinnell is this amazing place, I loved it, I wouldn't change it.

People try something and it doesn't work and they feel really freaked out because they thought maybe that was where they were going to be going for a while.

I didn't have any transition issues because I went to grad school right after graduation. My transition from Grinnell was sort of clouded by going from grad school then going to the corporate world which I think graduate school really prepared me for.

The first year and a half out of Grinnell I hated everything. It was rough, I didn't know what I was doing, I was lost, it was awful. All my friends were gone, I had no intellectual stimulation. It was just hell. I didn't know what I was doing when I graduated. But graduation came, I drove to Omaha cause it was the only other place I had to live cause that's where my family was. When I played it safe and did the responsible thing it's been the wrong choice... I've struggled on and off, but things are really picking up. It's good to have cool friends around and it's so much better now. The first few years were awful but things really picked up.

I had a horrible transition. I went home not knowing what I was going to do... There weren't a lot of alums in New York for that one random year of life. I didn't have a lot of people I was talking to or anything like that and I didn't know what I was doing. Kartik and I were friendly in college. We spent so much time together and our little group has grown up. There is a group of about 6 of us that hang out; Mr. Business dude, I'm a lawyer, an astronomer, a film person, a congressional aid, and an intern

coordinator... You wouldn't have put us together in a billion years. But this random group has sort of wound up out here. I think that honestly, it helps to have people like Grinnell-types around if you're making one of those transitions.

I'm in the end of that transition and all my friends are miserable. All of them... There are 15 Grinnell alums in the bay area, all of them were miserable. [My friend] said they kind of went around the room and told what they were doing and they were either clearly embarrassed or depressed about what they were doing. They all wanted to be saving the world and they were serving coffee.

I think there are people who can constructively say "I want to do something good and I'd like for it to be profitable for me as well" and there are ways to balance the two.

I had two of the worst years of my life after I left Grinnell. I missed Grinnell terribly. I missed my friends and I missed the intellectual stimulation, because regardless of whether you're learning new things it's not intellectually stimulating. It just wasn't as exciting as Grinnell. Real life came up very quickly from Grinnell and I had to face it.

I chopped off all my hair, pierced my belly button, stopped shaving my legs, it was like "I don't want to be here."

I'm so glad that I've been wandering about and learning more about myself and the world and where I want to be with respect to it. And that it's okay to not quite clearly know what I want to be doing, but I'm having a good time along the way and I'm enjoying my ride.

## **Conclusions**

Researching alumni's opinions about Grinnell has been valuable in that it has given us insight into the responses we received from current students. Issues of community and transition were not ones we had heard from current students, but the alumni responses generate a number of suggestions for Grinnell. First, many alumni felt it would be helpful for faculty members to discuss career plans and options with students throughout their college careers. Many had suggestions for the Career Development Office, which we have forwarded to that office in a separate report. In general, they felt that the CDO needs to play a more visible role on campus. Changes are planned for the CDO which are expected to improve their services to this end. We also heard a lot of alumni say that they widened their notions of business post-Grinnell. An all-campus effort to broaden the perceptions of business would be beneficial to all students. We suggest the college invites more alumni to come to campus to discuss career options with current students in an attempt to educate students about non-academic career possibilities and how to network with alumni. This personal interaction would encourage students to utilize alumni connections and give them a better idea of what to expect after leaving Grinnell.