Liesl Messerschmidt speech, 16 June 2014, Department of International Studies graduation in Eugene, Oregon

Good afternoon everyone, and congratulations grads! It’s my pleasure to be here today, and it is always nice to have an excuse to come back to Eugene!

Given the honor of speaking here today got me thinking a lot about my own graduation, back in… ahem…, and the feelings I had then of excitement and pride of achievement, anxiety over what was to come next, and even fear of the unknowns as my career unfolded before me. I can only imagine you have some of the same anticipations and anxieties I had. How long before you get a job? Where will you be living? How will you adapt? Where should you apply? What should you establish as your starting daily consulting rate? Will you need to do volunteer work first to get your foot in the door, and for how long? Etc.

We each have our own set of unanswered questions. The answers to my own questions (and those of other alums) were quite different than I ever could have imagined. My experience is indicative of some of the unexpected things that you will most likely also encounter, in your own ways. It has been full of hard lessons, unexpected twists and turns, chance encounters, amazing opportunities, unbelievable personalities, hope, joy, laughter and tears and heartache. In other words, enjoyable and despised bits. And I wouldn’t trade it for anything!

The biggest surprise for me over the last… ahem… years has been tripping over Department of International Studies alum everywhere I worked, all around the globe, in every conceivable capacity. Be prepared, for if you ever doubted that you have a stellar degree - even if from a growing department at a state school, let me reassure you! We are EVERYWHERE! We the alum ARE, and you WILL SOON BE the researchers and evaluators, the technical advisors, the facilitators, the implementers, the paradigm shifters, the changers and the shakers, the developers and users of new and innovative tools and technologies, the face of international workers in all fields. We the alum ARE, and you WILL SOON BE working for donor agencies, multilateral organizations, governments, international NGOs, academia, non-profits, foundations, etc.

Just take one look at the annual International Studies newsletter, and the profiles of your fellow students, and know that you are part of something special. You will grow to appreciate exponentially post-graduation, as I have and other alum will confirm, the beauty of the interdisciplinary nature of the Department of International Studies, with fingers in anthropology, economics, political science, education, government, law, business, health, environment, and much, much more. You will grow to appreciate that smaller departments have distinct advantages pre- and post-graduation. You will grow to appreciate the practical, hands-on curriculum developed and refined over years by high caliber professors. You will grow to appreciate that you leave the University of Oregon with more skills and exposures in your back pocket than your fellow students
graduating from Ivy League programs. You also leave with much less student debt to repay than they have, and with a trump card in Anita and the other faculty, who will surprise you by working their special magic connecting you to amazing opportunities and personalities around the globe. Anita is STILL linking and networking me, and it has been… ahem… years since I was her student.

Count your blessings!

When I graduated, Anita aptly pointed out that what seemed to excite me were things related to women’s health, and that I should consider getting a graduate degree in global public health. Thankfully, I took her advice, and went on to get my Master’s in Public Health at The George Washington University in Washington DC. I decided that I would never grow tired of my career if I focused on sex (I mean, really, who ever tires of talking about sex?). So I headed out to the field, first to the Himalayan country of Nepal where I had spent part of my childhood, and specialized in sexual and reproductive healthcare, particularly HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, and safer motherhood.

My first agenda was to find a language teacher so I could brush up on my spoken Nepalese, and learn the vocabulary of sex, sexual health, and reproduction, as my first assignments were all interviewing sex workers and their clients towards HIV prevention, care, treatment, and care. On strong recommendations, I sought out one of Nepal’s most experienced teachers. Big help she was – she point blank refused to teach me any of the vocabulary I required. It was “too embarrassing,” “too vulgar,” “too dirty” she said.

So, with Anita’s introduction, again, I turned to a fellow International Studies alum who was Nepalese and working on a German bilateral HIV program in Nepal. She agreed to coach me through my first round of field interviews with sex workers, helping me build rapport including what humor to use, what street slang was appropriate, and also taught me the corresponding technical terminology. And she shared invaluable field work tips for dealing with sensitive topics, like sex, that I continue to use… ahem… years later.

Take advantage of your fellow International Student alums! They are an invaluable resource!

Later, to further hone my field research skills, I saddled up to another University of Oregon alum, a Himalayan Anthropologist and Rapid Appraisal guru, and worked together for several months in the field on a comprehensive safer motherhood program evaluation as part of his team of researchers. We then went on to work with CARE together, leading their strategic planning process. Several months into that assignment, CARE asked me co-facilitate the final strategic planning workshop, while my senior mentor took notes as scribe. Incidentally, he’s sitting right there, and we have worked together professionally many times over the last… ahem… years. Please meet my father, Dr. DON
Messerschmidt, who has a PhD in Anthropology from U of O and who taught me many of my field research and interview tricks, and then as I became a specialist in my own right, was open to learning from me in return!

Take advantage of any mentorship opportunities that present themselves, no matter who the mentor is! Mentors are invaluable resources!

Thankfully, I come from a family that is neither shy nor afraid to laugh at itself or admit one’s mistakes. This has served me well in the field as I blundered through prying into people’s bedroom behavior and more. In addition to maintaining humility and a sense of humor, I quickly learned to expect the unexpected, and to appreciate the subtleties of language and interpretation of language – literally and culturally. This is an ongoing learning, and has played an important role in the technical advice and technical editorial services I have lent over the years.

I recently spoke at Portland State University to a group of senior anthropology students who were interested in pursuing careers or international-oriented, post-grad degrees. One student was extremely concerned about his options for post-grad work, fearing he would limit his qualifications in the job market by narrowing down to one degree.

My message to him is the same message I have for you: Never assume you are not qualified. This doesn’t mean to be arrogant, it just means to take stock of what you DO know, and see how it can be applied elsewhere. While my specialized focus has been sexual and reproductive health in South Asia, with an emphasis on HIV and AIDS, I have also worked in adult literacy, micro-credit, communications and documentation, maternal and child health, obstetric care and increasing access to healthcare services, conflict mitigation and peace building, strategic planning, paralegal support for conflict survivors, monitoring and evaluation, program development, grant and proposal writing, human rights and labor rights, executive coaching, environmental tourism, observational cohort research, and most recently advocacy for sexual minorities including men who have sex with men and transgender populations in Latin America and Africa.

Do I have degrees in all these topics? No. Nor, in some cases, even experience in the area when I took on the assignment. Rather, what I bring to every assignment is a flexible toolkit of attributes and experiences that I can creatively and affectively apply to new situations. Built up your toolkit, and when you get out there in the field you will find that the skills you have are highly adaptable to many situations. With a bit of imagination and self-confidence, you can cross-pollinate across many disciplines, taking lessons learned and good practices in one and adapting them to another.

The trick is to KNOW YOURSELF. Know who you are. In a lot of graduation speeches you are told to “Be Yourself.” I am not here to tell you this. What I am here to tell you is that first you need to know yourself and prepare yourself to be
the yourself you want to be. Build your own professional identity. What languages do you speak and how do you use language? Do you have a sense of humor? (Can you laugh at your mistakes?) Are you willing to try new things? Are you flexible in the face of change? Do you make assumptions or are you prepared to be surprised? Are you willing to accept that you don’t have the answers, and sometimes may not even know what questions to ask?

The bottom line is to be confident in who you are. In other degree areas you walk away with a certificate and a set of tools that you stick with for the rest of your career. But you International Studies graduates are different, for you are about to embark on careers that do not have one standard guideline. You have chosen a career that requires constant adaptation and change, internally and externally. In international development there is no cookie cutter solution or tool to anything, for we are dealing with cultures and people and contexts and ever-changing local and global issues that are not stagnant. No matter what the project is or the issue you come to address, the toolkit and the methods you work with must be flexible and adaptable. To achieve this, your toolkit must include humor, openness to being surprised, acceptance of things you might not necessarily support personally, and a strong appreciation and acknowledgment of your own strengths and weaknesses.

It has been a pleasure speaking with you today. The best of luck as you head out on your next adventure!