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The Boston Globe

Business

YOUR CAREER

Taking a turn to tech from a liberal arts background

By Joan Axelrod-Contrada | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT OCTOBER 06, 2013



LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

Ellen Daoust works as a multimedia developer for a Museum of Science outreach program.

ELLEN DAOUST graduated from Smith College in 2009 with a degree in government and Spanish and an interest in communications, but no real idea of how to turn that into a career.

But after three years in the national service program AmeriCorps, where she worked with video while involved in community and youth development, and eight months earning a graduate certificate in a digital media program at Northeastern University, Daoust landed a job as a multimedia developer at the Boston Museum of Science.

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“I knew the position was something that would be engaging and challenge me to grow in my video skills,” said Daoust, 26, of Jamaica Plain.

Daoust is an example of how job seekers can build on existing skills to launch careers in fast-growing and well-paying fields, such as technology. The Labor Department projects employment for Web developers to grow 22 percent from 2010 to 2020, faster than the average for all occupations. Web developers made between \$61,250 and \$99,250 in 2012, according to a survey by Robert Half Technology, a recruiting firm in Menlo Park, Calif.

Like many newly minted graduates, Daoust was unsure of her next step when she left Smith. Law school, working in environmental conservation, or teaching abroad were all possibilities. During internships in former US representative John Olver’s office and Boston City Hall, she wrote press releases, responded to constituents, and developed communications skills.

“I was thinking of 100 different things,” Daoust said. “If you graduate from a liberal arts college and don’t know exactly what you want, it can be a difficult, confusing, and frustrating time in life.”

In her first year in AmeriCorps, Daoust worked as a project volunteer coordinator for the United Way of North Central Massachusetts in Fitchburg. After taking video-making courses at the local access television station, she recorded a public service announcement for the United Way in the late spring of 2011. Her next year in the service program brought her to the Pacific



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Northwest, where she shot a video of a two-month environmental conservation project she had completed with a team of 10 other AmeriCorps members in Boise and Andrus, Idaho.

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Daoust was then accepted for the AmeriCorps Massachusetts Promise fellowship at the Computer Clubhouse, a program that helps underserved youth develop skills and confidence through technology, located at the Museum of Science. An important perk of the program: paid tuition for courses at Northeastern University’s College of Professional Studies.

“It appealed to me because it was a position that fused direct and indirect community service and called for skills in video production,” she recalled.

Students in the digital media program at Northeastern take courses such as foundations of digital storytelling, digital video production, lighting for the camera, and editing in the digital studio. Daoust left the program with valuable technical skills such as video compression, which allows viewers to access videos more quickly and see clearer, smoother images.

With the explosion of digitized content (text, graphics, audio, and video that can be transmitted over Internet or computer networks), the number of multimedia-related programs has grown quickly. Cynthia Baron, academic director of the master of professional studies program in digital media, said the program, which offers both a graduate certificate and master’s degree, has grown to about 130 students from four in 2007.

Baron said students typically come from one of three areas: computer science, graphic arts, or communications. The certificate generally takes 15 to 18 months to complete, the master’s degree about two years. Both programs are part time.

Daoust completed her certificate in May and applied for an opening in the Museum of Science's Engineering is Elementary program. Melissa Higgins, the program's director of curriculum development, said she received hundreds of resumes, but Daoust's coursework and video experience made her stand out.

In her day-to-day work, Daoust helps shoot and edit videos about engineering challenges such as building bridges and designing windmills. This month, she'll travel to Hollywood, Fla., to record a teacher teaching a unit on light and optical engineering. Daoust will then return to Boston to spend a month editing four videos, each 7 to 14 minutes in length, to be available for viewing next year.

"There's always something new," she said of her career, "and the more time I spend with technology, the more comfortable I get."

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