

Creating your own learning opportunities

UA universityaffairs.ca/career-advice/responsibilities-may-include/creating-learning-opportunities/

When it comes to skills development, sometimes you have to make advantage before you can take advantage.

I'm sitting at my desk in the Research Institute at SickKids, putting the finishing touches on our skills and career development curriculum for the upcoming academic year. Our office has an open-door policy, so one of the institute's PhD students pops in to talk about internships. They're interested in participating in our administrative internship program, which places grad students and postdocs in departments like grant development, knowledge translation and tech transfer. What they really want though is to work in the project management unit. They're seriously interested in moving into a project management role after they graduate, but they want to get some practical experience first to find out if they really enjoy the work and to build their network.

That's great, I tell the student, but there are a couple of issues: we don't currently have an internship placement agreement with the project management department and expanding the internship program isn't my top priority.

"Could we work together to add project management to the set of internship partners," the PhD asks? "If you can put me in touch with the manager I can get talks started about my specific placement and then loop you in to discuss their participating in the broader program."

"Absolutely," I say. "And you're my new favourite person."

This grad student had done the work of figuring out at least one possible career path in which they were interested. They'd decided that getting some practical experience was the next logical step in developing knowledge and skills. They'd figured out a possible way to get what they wanted. They'd found the right person to talk to about it. And they'd proposed a means to get what they wanted in a way that kept the ball in their court and also served the needs of the person they also needed something from.

The moral of the story: this was the perfect way to get something done in academia, and an awesome way for the PhD student to get what they wanted.

But not all grad students and postdocs are like this one — you might not be. Maybe there's something you want to learn, or something you want to practise, that's going to be useful to you as a researcher, as someone exploring career possibilities, or as someone about ready to launch a next career move, or as all three. You don't see opportunities to learn or practise "that thing" on campus, or the opportunities are only targeted at undergraduate students (which happens a lot). Maybe you're thinking about going it alone (which can mean paying steep fees to take a course or pursue an opportunity elsewhere) or giving up on the idea entirely.

But wait! You have other options:

- Reach out to the person offering the undergraduate opportunity you're interested in and ask if they can offer a version tailored to graduate students — people are very often willing to do this if they realize there's a need. It is *literally our job* to find ways to better serve our students, which means you. (And there is often a grad-student specific offering that you just haven't heard about — most grad students and postdocs tend to assume that student services are for undergrads only.)
- Find the people on campus who, like me, are responsible for overseeing and coordinating the work of professional development units, and see if they know who is teaching the skill you're looking to learn. If no one is responsible for that particular kind of training, ask if they can recommend someone who'd be good at it. Maybe something exists already that, with some tweaking or expansion, would meet your needs.
- See what professional-development support or funding is available through your faculty of graduate studies or the institution's career centre. Many universities have discretionary funding specifically for professional development (or other funding that could be used for it). This money can fund course development on campus, or can pay for the hiring of external facilitators. You might be able to have your university's existing graduate professional skills program expand its programming to offer what you're looking for this way, or you might be able to coordinate something yourself or within your department.
- Find the people on campus who know what you want to learn and ask them to teach it. Is there a professor on campus who is ace at academic social media? Chances are they'd be willing to run a workshop. Want to learn more about project management? Talk to the folks responsible for project management who work in administrative departments at your university. Looking for more practical, practice-based interview prep? Tell the workshop organizer and see if they'll tweak the session. (Again: people generally like to be helpful, especially people who work in any kind of student service. Don't feel weird about asking. Feel great about it—it can be *really* hard to figure out what our students and postdocs want and need via our usual tools: surveys, focus groups, and program evaluations. We love it when you just tell us directly what you want!)
- Look at other universities or organizations nearby. If you're at a smaller university but not far from the nearest University of Toronto-style behemoth with a well-developed professional skills program, it might be possible to snag a spot in some of their workshops. Just ask! If you're affiliated with a research institute like the one I work at, know that they almost certainly offer research training and career development support for affiliated graduate students and postdocs. We all like to see full rooms, and many of us open up sessions to students and fellows beyond our organizations when we have space.

Campus is home to dozens of free, high quality skill and career development opportunities, ones that would cost you hundreds or thousands of dollars as a professional. So take advantage of what's on offer on campus during the graduate school and postdoc years — and *make* advantage if what you want doesn't yet exist.

