career contradictions

By Kathleen High

Having a falling-out with your major could be your key to happiness

In their final academic year, graduating seniors are full of anxieties, emotions and questions. “Where can I find a job?” “How do I act in an interview?” “Will I be able to make enough money?” “Will I be able to do the job they give me?” After weeks and months of soul-searching, what if the senior comes to realize, “I know I don’t want to do this for a living?”

After spending four or more years developing skills to become a journalist or public relations professional, why do some graduates decide not to pursue that career direction upon graduation?

Neither journalism major Vincent Smith nor public relations major Heidi Rockey entered their desired careers after graduation, and they attribute their career shifts (and satisfaction) to the unpredictability of the real world.

Smith, who received his communication degree in 1993, has returned to the field he worked in before beginning college in 1991. Smith worked as a technical writer for Rockwell, but was laid off in 1990 because of national defense contract cutbacks. Looking to make a fresh start in a second career, he decided to become a high school journalism teacher.
Unfortunately, it wasn’t until Smith received his undergraduate journalism degree and completed half of his teaching credential program that he realized that he was in love not with teaching, but with learning. He also discovered that he did not have the temperament and improvisational talents to feel comfortable in the front of a classroom full of students.

When Smith discovered that he wasn’t destined to be a teacher, he looked to his other option — journalism. Smith, who received his bachelor’s degree when he was 57, felt that beat reporting was not for him either. “It’s a young man’s job,” Smith says. “The hours are hard, and it doesn’t pay much.”

However, when Smith decided to pursue a journalism career the economy was still tight, and he discovered that his age (and his experience) had turned into an unexpected liability.

“Age discrimination is a big issue,” Smith says. “I would have a great telephone interview, but when they met me in person, it was over.” Smith recalls occasions where interviewers seemed to be looking for young “yes-men” rather than an experienced, well-educated reporter. “I heard [one] manager openly say that they were only hiring new graduates to lower their costs,” he says.

Yet his reputation with his former employer prompted Rockwell (now Boeing) to hire him back as an engineer. Now more than ever, Smith enjoys his job at Boeing.

“I work with the best people I have ever worked with,” Smith says. “I don’t want to start over.”

Just as Smith has chosen not to pursue the career for which he trained, Heidi Rockey, a 1998 PR graduate, is working two jobs — neither of which are public relations per se, but each of which makes use of her Cal Poly Pomona education.

Rockey decided to attend college as a single parent just after her divorce. She needed something broad and marketable upon graduation and so was advised to major in PR. While she was in school, she met and married her husband, R.R. (Rockey) Rockey.

After graduation, Rockey tried with no luck to obtain a PR job, finding that most of the PR jobs she was interested in required three to seven years’ agency experience. But she needed to look no further than her own home to find a place where she could put her talents and and got full-page coverage in the local section of the paper with a full-color picture of our skydiving operation.”

During the slow season, Rockey also handles the administrative work for Executive Assistance Integration, a new software development company.

Rockey’s goals now center on using her educational background to develop the skydiving business. No matter how big the company gets, she still wants to be involved in the company’s management.

Like Rockey, Smith also found that his academic preparation was transferrable to his more technical field, particularly in the arena of writing.

“I’ve helped a friend in the office who is the editor of the [company] magazine,” Smith says. “Technical writing is very different from journalism. Journalism diversified my writing skills. I increased my confidence by the writing experience I gained at Cal Poly Pomona because of the diversification [of writing techniques]. When you increase your confidence in other areas, it spills over into everything you do.”

So what can students expect from their career choices as they enter the professional world?
Perhaps just that the journalism or public relations degree can unlock doors into more than just two given professions. Neither Smith nor Rockey are pursuing the careers for which they trained, yet a combination of academic preparation and real-world experience has afforded each the opportunity to craft a unique and satisfying career.