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Interviewed by Kaitlyn Phillips

When did you start your undergraduate degree? And then did you go back right away for your master's degree?

It took me quite a while to get my undergraduate degree. I started in 1974, studied for 12 months, worked for a year, and then went back (to Guelph) for another 12 months. I was short credits, so I finished my degree at the University of Calgary. I graduated with my undergraduate degree in 1980, and I did not go back to get my MBA until 1996, when my company was ten years old.

So, when you took that time off of education, you were working on your company and getting that started, is that correct?

Yes, I started my first business before I completed my BA, which I finished at night school. That first company did not survive the downturn of 1982, and so then I worked for other companies. For example, Reader's Digest, running their marketing and research division, called Dialogue Canada. I left there in 1987 when Reader's Digest sold the company that I was running and started my current business, The Dunvegan Group. I had some experience from my first business, and more technical strengths. I did not have business strengths, so when the company was ten years old and we were poised to decide on what our future looked like, I received a promotional piece on the University of Guelph's distance MBA in Agri-business (program), and it going to be online. I was in the very first cohort of the MBA in Agri-business. During this time, MBAs were starting to be segregated into various areas of specialization. The first step was to complete an advanced graduate diploma in Management from Athabasca, who was Guelph's partner in this program. Once that was completed, we transitioned to the University of Guelph.

Wow, that's interesting; I didn't realize that distance education goes back that far! Was it more convenient for you to have an online graduate school experience? What drew you to this school?

Well, the alternative option was in classroom, which considering I was running a company full time, was not a viable option. This did not mean we were part-time students, though we were considered full-time. While much of the work was asynchronous, there were portions of it that were synchronous, and the MBA included one week on campus during the second year of study. An interesting aspect of this distance program was the use of Lotus Notes, an online noticeboard system. We had conversations on this platform, and a good portion of your mark was based on your participation in those conversations.

I think we will come back to the education-type questions in a little bit, but I was just wondering if you would like to talk about some things about yourself. So, where did you grow up? Are you from Ontario?

I grew up in Richmond Hill, which is north of Toronto, and I went to both elementary and high school in Richmond Hill.

Would you say that you grew up in a city or a village? How would you describe Richmond Hill at the time that you were growing up?

Richmond Hill was a town that was surrounded by farmers' fields, though we were not a farming family. I would describe the area as semi-urban during that time.

Did you have a lot of connections to the rural lifestyle and the country identity, such as growing up around farming? What was it that really intriguing for you about agri-business?

I did not; when I moved to Calgary, I worked for an advertising agency, and then I started my first business. The advertising agency had customers like the Calgary Stampede, Western Cooperative Fertilizers, and other agri-business clients. Working for this agency was my first exposure to agri-business. When the downturn came and I closed that first business, I moved back to Toronto. I worked for other companies that specialized in consumer-packaged goods, which was not agri-business, rather it was quite a distance from it.

When I started The Dunvegan Group in 1987, I wanted to ensure high job satisfaction, even if I wasn't going to get rich quickly! I undertook my own market research to find out what clients were looking for that they were not currently receiving. One of the issues clients faced was that the research firms were often adversarial. Teams were reluctant

to have to do research because it often killed the idea, whether the idea was good or not is debatable!

One of the things that clients were looking for was collaboration. We would be on their team, standing behind the leader and looking through their eyes. We were then able to see their vision, and thus we could design the research to explore what could be done to increase marketability. It let us work with their team, as a member of the team.

Clients often wanted us to be more businesslike about our billings, because one thing about consultants is that they're good consultants, but they're bad businesspeople!

Having learned that, I looked at where the holes were in the marketplace.

Although I was in Toronto, I had some unique experience working in agri-business from my time in Alberta, so we set up the Farm Advisory Council. This was a panel of farmers across Western Canada that agreed to receive, complete, and return marketing research questionnaires through Canada Post. This allowed us to offer agri-businesses a very low-cost solution to their research and information needs. That was the door-opener for us and was what allowed us to showcase what we could do on a low budget, with eventual expansion potential. One of our clients began with a first expenditure of \$500, to eventually a quarter million (dollars).

This was actually a brilliant move!

We are talking about the undergraduate experience heavily in this project, so I have a couple of questions about your first 12 months at Guelph. Did you live on campus during that time?

Throughout my time at Guelph, I did not live on campus at all. I took a year off between high school and University. During that time, I worked for a publishing company and a bank, but I knew that wasn't what I wanted to be doing.

When I went to Guelph, I was in a hurry to finish my degree, and the trimester opportunity allowed me to do it fast. Initially, I was in pure sciences: physics, chemistry, and biology, though that wasn't really doing it for me. I then switched to a new program called Consumer Behaviour.

In that program, I took organic chemistry, but did not continue with physics or biology. I spent the rest of my time in those first 12 months in the School of Consumer Behaviour, which was an applied sciences program.

Did you feel like it was a good mix of Arts and Sciences for you to be able to explore different routes? What drew you to (the Consumer Behaviour) program?

What I really wanted to understand was why people buy things. For me, the sciences were beneficial to understand formulations, fragrances and potential for taste combinations, but it was not quite what I was after.

I took a year off to work for AC Nielsen, the Nielsen TV ratings company. They had a retail index division which was grocery products and over-the-counter drug products. What I learned through working with AC Nielsen was what people buy, but what I did not learn was the “why?”

When I returned to Guelph, I switched into social sciences to study the human behaviour aspects of marketing. In the consumer behaviour piece, there were research methods, statistics, and design, and because of this, I have a very mixed bag of educational experiences.

I would say a lot of my classmates at Guelph and my friends have family connections UofG, such as parents or cousins who went to Guelph. Did you feel connected to Guelph in that way, or was it something that you explored on your own without any prior connection?

I am the first member of my family to get a university degree. So, as you can imagine, having gone to Guelph, I had created a connection for my younger siblings. Because of my experience at the University, they had visited the campus and felt comfortable, so that's where three of the six went to pursue their studies!

Did you visit the campus at all before you came, or was it on your first day of class that you witnessed the campus?

Yes, I came to visit the campus before I began classes.

Were you choosing between many different schools and visiting a lot of campuses at that time, or just Guelph?

I applied to Waterloo, Western, McMaster and Queens, and I was accepted at all of them, though I didn't go there because they did not offer the same year-round study opportunity.

During your time at Guelph, were there any courses or any professors that stuck out to you in any memorable way? Whether they were really funny, or really involved, or just very kind people?

(At Guelph), I took philosophy, and my philosophy prof wanted to fail me for my paper on morals in a utopian society; what a topic! I used one of Ursula Le Guin's novels as the foundation for my argument, and he wasn't familiar with it. To him, the idea of science fiction didn't fit, and he made me come in and do an oral defense! Although I was only in second year, he was hard on me.

I can also recall the prof who taught us industrial design. We were working on the various aspects of (ergonomics) involved with hair care products, which had a combination of girl appeal and career appeal. At a later stage in my career, I actually ended up working on hair dryers and the design of them, as well as the design of cellular telephones.

You lived off campus in your first year, were you renting a house with some friends? Were you commuting from home? What was your setup in first year?

I never lived on campus, and in my first year, I lived (alone) in a basement apartment.

Would you say that it was pretty common for first years to live off campus at that time, or was it just a choice that you made?

Given that I'm one of six children, the deal was I had to pay my own way. I got student grants, and a piece of it was loans. I had to pay the difference, so living on campus was not affordable for me. During the time that I was at university, I had a job to support myself as well.

Were there any ways that you got involved on campus with student groups or sports/athletics or anything like that?

I would say I was not involved in anything political, but I was heavily involved in sports. I played volleyball, and I took tennis and golf lessons, and spent a lot of time in the (athletic centre). The facilities were not nearly as nice then as they are now!

Were you competing against other schools in volleyball, or were you playing intramural?

No, I did not play on teams that competed with other universities. It was just really to keep in shape, and to have the kinds of physical activities that I thought I could pursue later after I was no longer at university. For example, I didn't think I would continue to play volleyball, but I did think I would play golf and tennis later on.

When you were in your undergraduate degree, [when you] were not a part of the OAC, did you have a perception of the Aggies in any way? What did you think of them?

Yes, there were certainly stereotypes for both the Aggies and engineers, and we thought the [agriculture] students to be unsophisticated. You could tell with certainty if somebody had come from an agricultural background, just by the way they talked. They would say things like "I seen it", and I would reply with: "as soon as you say that I know that you came from a farm, so get rid of that if you want to have a career that extends beyond being on the farm."

The Aggies were lots of fun, and I think they had more fun than some of the others; they were less self-conscious.

I would say that little has changed about the perception of Agriculture students. The building I live in has an agricultural cluster, so you certainly know when it's Aggie pub night. Do you have any recollections of Aggie pub night or any other traditions?

No, I don't think so. The only tradition (that I recall) is the painting of the cannon. I can tell you that on Thursday nights, I did not work, and on those nights, I went to the dance. If we did not want to dance with the individual that was asking us, we would tell them we were engineering students or Aggies!

When you were doing your MBA, you were mostly online. You said you were on campus for one week?

Yes, just one out of the whole course, and it was a 36 month (program). I'm sure it can be done in less time now, but the course was being written only one term ahead of us. Because we were the first cohort, it took the full 36 months to complete the program, and out of those 36 months, we were on campus for only one week.

Did you feel included in the culture of the OAC during your time? Or would you say that it was more like you were you were a student at the OAC, but not involved in those traditions?

In the MBA program, we did not feel connected to Guelph, other than that we had Tom Funk, the head of the School of Agriculture. When we came to campus, we stayed in Lambton Hall in the dead middle of August.

There is no air conditioning in that residence, so we were issued with a tiny little fan and a towel, and we shared bathroom facilities. We were told to bring our own towels, because the ones supplied didn't qualify as one, although they may (have qualified) as hand towels. We were in that residence for the week, but we tended to work in the classrooms late at night because they were air conditioned.

At the end of the week, we had a skit night, and several of the skits were about the towel, which was barely big enough to wrap around your head to dry your hair!

Would you say that that week on campus was one of your more treasured memories of your program because you got to be with your classmates?

We had impressions of each of our classmates, but we hadn't seen them before because there was no video. So, we had an idea of what they might look like, and what they would be like - some of them were, and some of them were not. That time on campus was an incredibly special time that I think everybody cherishes. Within my cohort, many of us stayed connected and are still connected now.

Tell me more about how you maintained contact with them. How many people would you say you still are in contact with from Guelph?

There were only 32 students in the cohort, and I'm in contact with about six of them. Some of them were from other countries, and some lived close to Guelph; now that I live in Woodstock, I'm in geographic proximity to a few of them. We mainly use Facebook and LinkedIn to stay in contact virtually.

I would say that I was unique in the cohort, in that I didn't come from an agri-business background, and that I was the only one in the class that had a marketing-related background. One of the modules in the course was marketing, and the group that got me got the highest mark in that module! This was because right at the end of it, I asked for the business, which nobody else did!

So, has your life and business experience really shone through to help you?

Yes, it really did make a difference for me. Because I was running my company at the same time, I was trying to keep a low profile, thus I didn't want to be the leader of every group project, although it's hard to suppress that leadership propensity.

Of course, you don't have to answer this if you don't feel comfortable, but can you think of any obstacles that you had to overcome, or some really challenging times throughout your degree from start to finish?

In my undergrad years, I had a hard time adjusting to being a student, sitting in a classroom, and taking instruction. Previously, I had been working in a business environment where I had some autonomy, and I didn't have to study. In business, there is not the same type of academic proof of absorption and comprehension as there is in university.

So, I sought support from Student Services, and I saw a counsellor for several weeks early on to help me adapt. This allowed me to back myself away from that professional persona, which was tough. It was also difficult to be alone as much as I was (because I was off campus and living alone), so I often stayed overnight on campus, studied with other students, and hung out with them when I wasn't working.

This routine was demanding; it meant you had to be clear about the value of your time, and there was no time for goofing off.

How did your view of academics change from your undergrad - when you were studying really hard - and then you were working on your business for 10 years, and then going back to school. Was that adjustment back to academics challenging or were you ready for it?

When you go back to university as a mature student, it's a different proposition. All members of that first MBA cohort had been working in the business world for about 7 to 10 years, so it was a different community. The challenges were different, and it was quite collaborative, whereas the undergrad level was seriously competitive. The MBA program was more collaborative, with a greater interest in seeing everyone succeed: having people bring their specialty to the group projects, and not making people do what they didn't do well, which was more like the business world.

Would you consider yourself to be a part of alumni events within the OAC? And would you consider yourself to be an Aggie or just someone who graduated with a degree from the OAC?

I received the Lifetime Achievement Medal, which is now the Young Alumni Award. So, I feel connected to the University of Guelph because of that; it really connects me to the alumni activities, although I haven't been on campus since before COVID.

At one point, I was part of an international group of agri-business grads, and we reached out to other schools that (had) agri-business programs around the world and provided guidance for their programming.

I would say that my connection to the campus is not as strong today as it has been.

Do you have anything that you want to add that you feel you didn't really get to talk about your experience like Guelph and the OAC?

I have lots of happy memories (of Guelph). It's a beautiful campus, especially at this time of year; it is glorious. I have very clear memories of walking in various parts of the campus, and I stayed in touch with a handful of my undergrad colleagues.

Because of the way I did my undergrad, I didn't go through with the same cohort all the way. However, the MBA has been truly meaningful.

I had an undergraduate degree in social sciences, and I suffered for many years from impostor syndrome. I thought: "Oh, my God, I don't know what I'm doing, and someone's going to find out, and it's going to be awful".

When I graduated with my MBA, all of that went away. I had confirmed that I knew some things that were worth knowing, and I had also confirmed that I did not know everything, and it was okay, I could learn! But mostly, that it is okay to not know everything about everything, because nobody can.

This is a complete side story, but I belonged to a group of 12 women business owners, and we met once a month at somebody's house. We had the dinner catered, and it was what would today be called a mastermind, but we didn't have that word then.

When I graduated, I invited them all to dinner at my house to celebrate. I told them about having suffered from impostor syndrome, and they had no idea, but of course, everyone around the table had it. They were astonished to hear, because they didn't think I was one of them from that perspective.

From time to time since then, I can acknowledge that I have felt like I didn't know what I was doing, but that's okay. If you're taking risks, you probably don't know what you're doing, and if you're a research consulting firm, you don't know what the outcome will be. If you did, it would be called engineering! The last thing I would like to tell you is that I now teach at Conestoga College in their School of Business where my classes are on business leadership.