



INTERVIEW

WITH BRIDGET JOHNSTON

Purdue University alumnus Bridget Johnston serves as the interactive technology projects manager at the Children's Museum of Indianapolis.



BRIDGET JOHNSTON

What brought you to Purdue?

There were a few different things that brought me to Purdue. I was looking at mostly in-state schools in Indiana for affordability, and I was looking at a couple of out-of-state schools as well. When I graduated from high school I wasn't

completely sure what I wanted to study in college, and I was looking at Purdue specifically because the professional writing program—which is what I ultimately got my major in—seemed pretty versatile for a writing degree. Had I wanted, I could have taken it a lot of different ways. During my undergrad, I was very interested in journalism. I worked at the *Exponent*, eventually becoming features editor there. I also had an internship at C-SPAN, where I used my major for political coverage of the Republican primary that landed Mitt Romney the nomination as the Republican candidate for president in 2012. Instead of a straight-up journalism degree or a straight-up creative writing or English degree, it seemed that the professional writing program could take me in a lot of different ways.

What does professional writing prepare students for, and why is it important?

When I was at Purdue, a student could either choose to focus on creative writing or technical writing within the program, and I chose technical

writing. The program gives students a good, broad basis of writing, communication, planning, and even project management at some level. It can prepare students for whatever they choose, and it provides a lot of flexibility to study other things and really focus on them and build coursework around those other subject matters. For example, I talk a lot about how I was interested in journalism as an undergraduate. I really worked to build my résumé and experience with writing in a journalistic sense, doing things like interviewing, networking, and building resources; however, once I took a 400-level English course that taught the basics of web development, I got interested in that. I took that as a junior, and I started to transition my interests into web- and tech-based focuses.

The program really laid that foundation of good, solid coursework where I was able to focus on and take classes in areas in which I was interested. Another thing that I really enjoyed about the program is that everybody who had that major also had to have a minor outside the English department, which could be anything—like computer science, anthropology, Spanish—to add another level of coursework on top of the major that allows students to build their skills.

You mentioned your time at the *Exponent* and C-SPAN. Could you expand more on those experiences?

I had started my first semester at Purdue, and that was the only semester that I wasn't at the *Exponent*. I got there, and I knew what it was, but I didn't know a whole lot about it. I got interested in it from

seeing, reading, and hearing people talk about the paper. I had attended their callout the spring of my freshman year and I started as a reporter for the “Campus Desk.” I did that for two years, and then I applied to be on the senior editing staff. I had started as an assistant features editor and was moved up to features editor. I managed a group of ten to fifteen reporters, and I also was writing at least one story for every day that we published. There was a focus on events happening at Purdue and the people who were taking part and organizing them. I also wrote profiles on people. My favorite story that I had ever written was a profile I did on Bruce, the piano guy at the Neon Cactus. I met up with him and hung out with him and his kids for a day. I wrote a profile about him and his daily life when he’s not playing piano at the bar to let people know more about this local celebrity. It was a lot of fun to do, and people enjoyed reading it and getting to know him because he’s so well-known for what he does there.

The professional-in-residence and communications professor Maura Pierce served as a mentor to me while I was at the *Exponent*. She had been a former producer at C-SPAN and had encouraged me to try and get an internship toward the end of my time at school. I had participated in two internships previously at publications in Cincinnati, but Maura encouraged me to reach farther. I was either going to graduate early or I could take a remote class and get an internship, which is what I decided to do. I ended up applying to an internship at C-SPAN because I was interested in their very objective way of communicating political news and affairs. I did a skype interview with them and everything went well, so I moved to Washington, DC, for what would have been my last semester at school. The Republican primary was happening during my time there, and I focused on a lot of other political affairs and their digital media department by getting them online and creating a second screen for those watching C-SPAN or other networks on television by live updating them and offering links and other information. I created a C-SPAN’s first blog that followed different events happening in Washington and nationally. Because the primary was the big event happening in politics, we spent a lot of time following potential candidates. I also worked on some other projects that C-SPAN had produced, like *Booknotes*.

While I was there I tried to do as much as I could because it was a golden opportunity for me. I talked to a lot of people, I sat in and helped out as

much as I could on morning shows, and I really got to know some people there so that I could learn as much as possible and get the best experience because I had uprooted my whole life to move to Washington.

How did these experiences transition to your current position at the Children’s Museum in Indianapolis?

I graduated in May 2012 after my internship and I didn’t have a job. I was freaking out. The *Washington Post* had this article I read saying that now was the worst time to graduate college in history, so that was a really scary time. I worked really hard to get the best grades and the most experience so that I could have the highest chance of getting a job in something that I really wanted. That just hadn’t happened by the time I graduated. I unfortunately didn’t let myself enjoy my commencement ceremony because I was concentrating on how I was going to make money and build my career. That was a shame; I wish I had let myself enjoy it a little bit more.

I had been reached out to on LinkedIn by my former boss who ran his own web development company in Chicago. It was a consulting firm and we built websites for all sorts of different clients, primarily for ticketing and select your own seat software. He reached out to me and said that he was interested in talking to me based on what I had listed on LinkedIn. I had a phone interview, and then I went up to Chicago and had an interview, and things were looking pretty good. I accepted a position as an entry-level project manager. It was a good first job. I had learned a lot in the first year or so, but I really wanted to transition to a career path that would allow me to use technical skills and communications skills but also help people. I also was really interested in going anywhere in the Midwest, preferably for a nonprofit with a focus on education. I looked around and didn’t really know anything about Indianapolis, having grown up in the Cincinnati area. I saw a listing posted in on the Children’s Museum website for my previous position, and it was for a person who could work on the website and build marketing emails. I had a good technical base of skills and knew that had I gotten that position I would have to learn a lot more, and I did. I applied, interviewed, and ended up coming on board. I learned a ton in that role that I hadn’t learned at that much of a rate before, which was really exciting. My old boss, who no longer works at the Children’s Museum, mentored me very well and

encouraged me to follow my interests in other areas of the museum. My main interests, which I never would have even thought of in undergrad, were working on exhibit technology. It was so fascinating, cool, and creative to me. I remember being in my first exhibit team meeting and being wowed by what these people were talking about. After a while my boss allowed me to project manage for small portions of exhibits. That grew and grew, and I ended up as project manager for entire exhibits. I was promoted to my current position a little over a year ago. Now I manage all areas of exhibit technology production.

Can you talk about what you do as the technology projects manager?

I oversee the technology production for all of our exhibits: permanent, temporary, and traveling. What that means is that I will meet with a core team of individuals with different specialties—for example, graphic designers, architects, subject matter experts, whoever is needed for the exhibits. Together we come up with core messages for exhibit topics. One we are working on now is American pop culture, specifically in the latter half of the last century up until today. So we have a lot of core educational messages revolving around popular culture. We analyze those messages and think about how we can communicate them to our visitors through technology, special design, artifacts, and anything to be seen within an exhibit. I work with the team from creative idea generation through project planning, development, scheduling, testing, implementation, and sometimes maintenance if things need to be revised or fixed.

Is there a lot of interdisciplinary work in how you collaborate with your core team?

Absolutely. We have a representative serve on the core team from pretty much from every department that works on the exhibit, whether it's the guys down in the woodshop who build things, the special designers who are the true architects of how the gallery will look, our graphic designers, or technical people like myself. Each representative will report out to his or her own teams. I serve as a representative on the core team, and then I go back and fill in my own team of developers in the IT department. So the team for our exhibits are incredibly interdisciplinary. We have so many people with great ranges of skill sets, and everybody is very creative and motivated because we also have to work on tight deadlines. We have so

many people of different backgrounds and skill sets serving on our core team, so everyone is bringing different ideas to the table. Somebody who might not interact with technology on a day-to-day basis like I do might have a really great idea for a game or exhibit to include in the gallery. Collaborating like that allows people to communicate and build off those ideas.

What would you say is the importance of having a liberal arts education?

One of the things that I find most valuable about it is that it can give students an excellent perspective on the world and other people and how they work. Speaking from my own experience, I was professional writing and my minor was anthropology, so I learned a lot about the world and other people. It gives a broad but in-depth basis of knowledge on how to approach everything—whether it's work, job-hunt, or even day-to-day communication.

What advice do you have for students trying to get involved in research or internships?

Do as much as you can. I served in internships during summers or during semesters where I wasn't taking a whole lot of credit hours, and I had planned it that way so that I could really focus on those internships. What I did to get those internships was doing as much as I could while I was taking heavier course loads. I would work hard in my classes and in volunteering, as well as at the *Exponent*, to really build a big basis of experiences and skill sets. When you're out there looking for internships, keep a broad mind and apply to as many places as possible. When you see opportunities where one aspect sounds like it might be interesting and another seems like it might not be, just go for it and learn more. Even if you don't want to pursue it later, it's valuable to learn about it.

At my first internship I worked in special features for *Cincinnati Magazine*, and it's a great publication, but I learned that I didn't necessarily want to work in a special features section of that sort of publication. It just wasn't for me. It's important to learn what you don't want to do as much as what you do want to do. Another thing that was intimidating for me at the time was moving to Washington, DC. It seemed almost impossible. I had never even been there before the day I moved. I would say keep an open mind about going places, even if you haven't been there before. It seems like so much to pack up and leave campus to go somewhere

completely different, but once you get that opportunity secured, everything falls into place a lot more easily than expected.

Overall, get a broad range of experiences during undergrad. A part of undergrad is building relationships with friends and colleagues and at school, but another part that I think is really important is building that experience outside the classroom.

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Interviewer



Sunny Asaf is a junior in the College of Liberal Arts, where she is studying anthropology with a minor in animal science. She served as the coordinator for this volume of the *Journal of Purdue Undergraduate Research*, in addition to performing as secretary for the Purdue Anthropology Society.