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A Path to Becoming an Actuary

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Becoming an actuary is not something that happens by accident. The exams do not pass themselves. It is a long journey that requires many careful considerations. When I started, I knew I'd like to end up in a fulfilling, rewarding, and interesting career, but I didn't know the right path for getting there. This is the story of my experience launching a new career in the actuarial field.

After college, I became a high school math teacher. While there were many great aspects of the job, I eventually decided to move on from teaching. I did some soul searching, combed through career websites, and talked to many colleagues. After lots of research, I came to the conclusion that I wanted to be an actuary. Though I did not know what my ideal job in the actuarial community would be, I decided to get serious about acquiring the skills necessary for success.

I started to study for exams in my spare time and considered whether it would be best to jump into a career or go back to graduate school. Many of the skills I acquired in college and while teaching were not the same skills that analysts, consultants or actuaries have. I concluded I was unprepared to make this transition without going back to school. I considered business school, but realized that I might spend two years and massive amounts of money only to end up just as under-qualified. Instead, I focused on schools where I could learn hard skills in statistics, actuarial mathematics, and accounting without adding too much to my student debt. I chose the University of Connecticut, because in addition to having strong departments in those fields, it is also a pipeline to the actuarial community in Hartford, Conn.

Being a student with a purpose is completely different from just being a student. As a teacher, I became acutely aware of the habits of mind that differentiated successful students from unsuccessful ones. Students who were inclined to see value in the subject matter and held a belief in their own ability to learn were immensely more successful. These same students also had a stronger

conceptual foundation and greater procedural fluency. I learned to appreciate the differences between students who were interested in mastering the material versus those who just wanted a grade. Now that I was going back to school to acquire specific knowledge and skills, I approached interacting with professors and studying in a more deliberate manner.

I always kept in mind that my ultimate goal was a career and not just a degree. Unfortunately, going back to school meant that I was gaining more classroom experience instead of workplace experience. This made getting a summer internship a key part of my transition into a new career. My goal was to discover the kind of job that would be a good fit. I wanted exposure to both Life and P&C projects, so I worked as a summer intern in the Risk Consulting and Software sector of Towers Watson. It was humbling to start out at an entry-level position, but working with a diverse group of people with varying levels of experience gave me long-term perspective.

Studying for exams, going back to school, and working with highly capable people has each helped give me a better sense of the commitment it takes to become a successful actuary. Now, my realistic short-term goal is to simply build competency, rather than expertise. Like most people launching a new career, I still don't know where my path will take me, but I am more confident about the journey because I tried to carefully make the best decision at each step along the way. ☆



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