CAL alumnae Kat Palczewski, Jessie Whitmill and Brooke Hawkins love living and working in Chicago.
**Chicago: Their Kind of Town**

*MUSES* editor Mike Jenkins spoke with three recent College of Arts & Letters graduates and new alumnae Brooke Hawkins (English and Professional Writing, 2013), Kat Palczewski (Professional Writing, 2013), and Jessie Whitmill (Professional Writing and Journalism, 2013), who found their first jobs in Chicago, as well as 1993 German and International Studies alumnus Tom Mitchell, who is now president of the company where he first worked. Two of the three recent grads, Jessie and Kat, are presented here in a Q & A format, while Tom’s story follows in article form. (Brooke Hawkins had a last-minute commitment that precluded an interview.) Kat is a social media strategist at Resolution Media; Jessie is a user experience designer with AdviseStream, and Brooke is a technology consultant at HandsOn Tech Chicago, AmeriCorps VISTA.

**How did your internships with the College of Arts & Letters help prepare you for “the real world” and your first jobs after graduation?**

**Kat:** A lot of the people in my position who I work with had to have more internships and hone skills outside of their college experiences to qualify for the job. The Creativity Exploratory fellowship and my communications and social media internship with the College of Arts and Letters at MSU gave me an early start.

**Jessie:** Yes, we had a lot of responsibility as interns—responsibility that interns don’t typically get. And even though what I’m doing now isn’t exactly what I was doing for the College, my graphic design internship with the College of Arts and Letters helped give me more experience to get the job in the first place.

**Kat:** I even felt, when I first started, that having had the CAL internship was part of the adjustment. Because you guys having had complete trust in me made it difficult being at the bottom of the totem pole. But that’s a much better problem to have than not being prepared to be successful.

**Jessie:** I agree. I’m still getting used to being at the bottom of the totem pole. It’s hard sometimes.

**Beyond the fact that in the business world, if a client fires your company, it can mean lost revenue, do you think there was a different vibe in the College in respect to doing the work?**

**Kat:** Yes, that’s one thing I’ve said. In fact, a big adjustment for me was that with the College I felt very connected to what I was doing. And, with my current position, I didn’t even meet the client until two months after I started. So it’s hard to connect to what you’re doing when you’re not part of the company that you’re really working for. In fact, when I interviewed for my current job, I compared how my working for different departments in the College is similar to working for different clients. Because they all want different things, and all are very different themselves.

**Jessie:** That’s especially true with the College of Arts and Letters because all of the departments are so different. I mean, you have Philosophy and Art and Theatre and all the languages, and so much more (English, Religious Studies, WRAC). So it’s hard to please everyone.
What did you learn at MSU and in the College that you feel helps you most in your current jobs?

**Kat:** For me, it’s general communication skills, like presentations, writing e-mails, writing memos. My grammar classes still help me a lot when I’m writing reports, or even in creating e-mails. I think that is a very important skill for looking professional in my job. We probably write 25 e-mails a day, so being concise in e-mails, writing well like we learned in Professional Writing, and knowing your audience, has been most helpful.

**Jessie:** I was in the digital and technical track of Professional Writing, so having learned about privacy and social media has been huge because that’s often what my job is all about. So those classes have been helpful in my work.

What about relationships with coworkers? Do you think it helped working with and alongside so many others in the Creativity Exploratory and other CAL spaces? Is it different or similar for you now?

**Jessie:** Well, right now, I’m working with a lot of people who are close to my own age—around 25. So while it was nice and quiet in the design space at the C.E., I’m always around people now, and it’s never really quiet. I’m not in a cubicle or anything now, but I do hope for that, down the road.

**Kat:** I think that my work environment is really similar to what we had in the College, because it’s important to be professional, but also to know how to relate to people and be friendly enough that you can bounce ideas off each other and be creative.

So I think my experience in CAL helps me fit into the environment that I work in now. We have a lot of young people who have like interests to me, and having real professional work experience, which is what we got from the College, helps so much. That’s probably the most valuable thing I learned: knowing how to act in a work environment. Other internships I had, I didn’t get that. Working with the dean and our supervisors, faculty and others in the College, and having all the people our age being at the same level, you got a good snapshot of what it’s like to be in the professional world. Especially compared to other internships, where you work by yourself, do your tasks, and don’t have a lot of responsibilities. We were able to communicate with everyone we worked with, and I think that was truly helpful.
Does that include working with different types of people and learning how everyone can be different and yet the same?

Yes. As well as learning how to stay out of some things...and take a step back.

Jessie: And how to avoid...

Kat: ...conflict.

Jessie: Yes...conflict. I think conflict is inevitable when you have multiple work partners and supervisors. But in the College, I learned how to streamline things between different departments and people to get the work done.

So, when you left the College and MSU, did you feel confident in your own abilities; in yourselves?

Jessie: Yes.

Kat: Definitely. I think that our supervisors were really good about encouraging us, but also giving us feedback. That was one thing that was really nice about my internship with the College: I never felt like I did something wrong or got scolded, but I knew that my supervisors always felt comfortable giving us feedback whenever we needed it. That was truly helpful, because now, in our jobs, we’re definitely going to get feedback and criticism from our bosses. So if you guys had sugarcoated everything, it wouldn’t be helpful now, and it probably wouldn’t have helped in the first place. So that definitely helped my confidence; just knowing things I needed to work on, and how to constructively do that.

Jessie: I think I definitely learned how to present myself well in developing projects and other work, as well as when and how to express my viewpoint.

Kat: I think that everyone gave us opportunities that made us feel really confident in pitching our own ideas. In fact, that’s one thing that I’ve noted in my new job: that I feel confident pitching ideas. And, when I think back, it’s because I was really supported in the College, and that gave me confidence to be able to pitch ideas to my boss. I don’t think that’s something that I would feel comfortable doing if I didn’t have that experience: of trying my own projects, and failing, and trying again.

Jessie: I agree. In my first internship, I didn’t get any feedback at all on anything. And that was really frustrating. And then at the College, I did. And now, in my job, I get plenty of feedback every single day. So I feel like that’s been a good progression.

Kat: And I think that when we got feedback at CAL, it was explained to us. It wasn’t just, “Here’s the edited version of this story...post it.” It was, “This is what you did wrong.” Or, “This area could be better,” and, “This is how it can be fixed.” So comments that were actually constructive for us.

What about being encouraged during your CAL internships to share your work with coworkers and solicit their opinions? Was that helpful?

Jessie: Definitely. I do that now, too. I’ll show my work to coworkers asking for their thoughts before I go run to my boss. And I feel that the bosses appreciate that, too, because they’re busy.

Kat: I think it was also helpful that we had communications interns and graphic design interns work together; because, in any company, you’re going to work with people who have different jobs than you. So I think it was helpful to see the bigger picture of what we were doing, but also to know how to communicate to people in different fields.

Jessie: Especially with Kat and I, in particular, because we each have our own job focus, but we also know that the other is competent in communication and design. So I feel that it was good being encouraged to work together.

Kat: And I feel I learned a lot from Jessie by working on designs, and having her give me feedback on that and other stuff. That was one way of learning from each other, as well, that was really helpful. It definitely helps to have had all of our experiences working with all different types of people, too. In our time at the College, we worked with dozens of different people, so I think that helps in working with different personalities now.

In your internships with the College, were you provided all the tools that you needed to succeed?

Kat: Yes! I miss everything. I want the camera back! Having the C.E. design lab, I feel that I learned a lot of programs...and even the videography stuff was such a great resource...those are all things that I wouldn’t have learned otherwise. And they’re not necessarily things I use at work. But, recently, our client said something about us doing a video for them, and I said, “Oh, I can do that. I did that in my internship.” And that was a really random thing, but just having that skill opened the door enough that I could work on that project.

Jessie: Having expertise around us was just as important as the tools. I think that one of the reasons why I’m valued at my job right now is—well, the design work, obviously—but also the communication part of it, such as the text on a web page or a poster. Working at CAL, I was always made very aware that I needed to consider how the text worked with a design. For instance, I remember, if a line ended with a preposition, I was instructed to drop it to the next line. I will always remember that. It’s one of my pet peeves now.
Chicago Alumnus
Tom Mitchell Says Dual Degree Worthwhile

As a senior at MSU, College of Arts & Letters alumnus Tom Mitchell says his guidance counselor pointed out that, although he had never formally declared it, he had enough German language credits for a double major along with International Studies from the College of Social Science.

Mitchell had taken German language courses since his freshman year of high school, due in part to having a strong interest in European history. He notes that it was a close choice between taking Russian or German, as his high school had excellent programs in each.

“Coming out of MSU with my dual bachelor’s degrees, I didn’t have a specific goal of working for a German company,” Mitchell says. “But I knew that I wanted to work in my hometown of Chicago, for a company where I could occasionally use my German, and also travel to Germany and other places in the world.”

Directly out of MSU, Mitchell ended up landing a job in 1993 in Chicago with trade show company Messe Düsseldorf North America (MDNA), ultimately guaranteeing a lock on satisfying all three of his job criteria.

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As U.S. marketing and development manager, he was responsible for the promotion of some of the world’s leading industry trade fairs, including drupa, K, Medica, Interpack, and boot Düsseldorf. Over the past 15 years, in addition to shows in Germany, Tom has brought pavilions to trade fairs in markets as diverse as Singapore, Brazil, Russia, and the Czech Republic. During this time, he also launched the first Internet presence for MDNA, as well as created a customized database system for sales and customer management.

In 1996, Mitchell transferred to New York to open Messe Düsseldorf North America’s new office in Manhattan and, in 1999, returned to MDNA’s Chicago office as senior director, strategic development and operations, where he oversaw day-to-day infrastructure and planning for future events and projects. In November 2005, he was promoted to president.

“I’ve been with the company for 21 years now, and the ability to travel and explore the world has been one of the most incredible opportunities of my career,” Mitchell adds. “Adding to that is the similarly incredible personal feeling of accomplishment I still get from having applied myself, learned a foreign language, and being able to use it in my work.”

Mitchell fondly remembers an instance where his knowledge of German allowed him to assist his non-German-speaking mother, when she played host to a non-English-speaking Swiss executive from her company traveling to the U.S.

“We picked him up at the airport, and although he spoke Swiss-German, I was able to translate the entire conversation back and forth between my mother and this guy,” Mitchell says. “My mother looked at me a bit differently after that, seeing how I so easily used what I’d learned in school to best advantage.”

Mitchell notes that having knowledge of the culture has been just as important.

He says that the cultural differences among various countries are still amazingly diverse and highly important, especially knowing that so many citizens of the U.S. have never set foot outside its boundaries.
“Beyond its strong language programs, one of the major reasons I chose to attend MSU was its overseas program in Germany,” he says. “I took part in the College of Arts and Letters’ Mayen, Germany program in the summer of 1992. Experiences like that can make a huge difference in learning how to interact with cultures other than your own.”

Discussing an upcoming trip to Brazil as an example, Mitchell says that while he’s been to Brazil before and knows a handful of words in Portuguese, being able to hone in on the culture, knowing how to carry yourself differently, enjoy a meal or make a toast because you know how it is done in the culture, can make all the difference in how you are perceived and accepted in a foreign land.

“For instance, in Germany, you always begin a meal saying ‘Guten Appetit!’ to wish everyone well,” he says. “And when you make a toast, you look the other person(s) directly in the eye, whereas in the U.S., we often look away during a toast. Taken all together, these differences are not ‘little’ things, but important cultural cues.”

Mitchell says that the differences among countries and cultures spill over into how trade shows are conducted, too. In the U.S, the average trade show is more an informational gathering, where attendees come to get acquainted with the trade show exhibitors, their companies and products.

“In Germany,” Mitchell says, “attendees include the people with the money, the decision makers and the buyers, and they actually purchase the product there.”

He adds that there are some important differences between his firm and its U.S. counterparts, too. MDNA is both an organizer of trade shows and a full trade show operator. It organizes entire trade shows; markets and promotes events happening in Germany and around the world, and also attends, which puts more of a face-to-face onus on MDNA than some other organizers.

“And there are other key differences,” Mitchell says. “In Germany, we not only own the show, but also the facility where we put it on. These are major shows that everyone in each industry knows, such as Interpack, the top international trade show for the packaging industry. In fact, we recently had an MSU School of Packaging contingent there including the head of the program who was actually on the docket.”

During fall term 2013, Mitchell returned to MSU, where faculty asked him to speak to students in German classes, and participate in an International Studies panel discussion.

“As part of the panel,” he says, “we all got up and told students how we took languages, and how we are now using them in our jobs. I explained how my knowledge of German has allowed me to take businesses by the hand and help them succeed in international markets. And I told them how the importance and value of a building a network cannot be overstated.

“That’s what I feel I’ve been doing in my career: building a network of relationships. And knowing a foreign language definitely helped me better communicate along the way.

“One core message that we all reinforced with students, though, was that to succeed upon graduation, ‘You must set yourself apart.’ And knowing another language is an excellent way to accomplish that!”

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