

MC Forward Podcast
Roberta Buckberg
Transcript

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MIKE

Welcome to this episode of MC Forward, a podcast that focuses on Montgomery College individuals who are leading from where they are. I'm your host Dr. Michael Mills. Joining me today is Roberta Buckberg, Employer Relations Coordinator at the College. Roberta, thanks for joining me.

ROBERTA

Thanks for having me, Mike. I'm glad to be here.

MIKE

So, let's talk a little bit about leadership. In...from your perspective as an Employer Relations Coordinator, you send out emails on a regular basis, uh, from employers looking for student employees. What do you hear from employers about leadership? What are they looking for in leaders?

ROBERTA

They're looking for students who are willing to step up and take initiative. Students who have taken some chances. Students who have been involved in clubs and organizations on campus. And you know, the critical thing I think for students to learn is that your GPA may be somewhat important in terms of [Pause] going forward and getting scholarships or getting admissions into um four-year schools or graduate schools, but the longer you're around, the...the more your GPA fades, and what you've learned in school is really important. So, you might not have gotten the best grade in a course, but some of the lessons from the course in History, in Communications, in Scientific Theory, if they're sticking with you and if you're able to bring them to bear in everyday work, then you're educated. It...it sort of doesn't matter if you are a 4.0 or a 2.5. If you've incorporated those lessons into your psyche and into the way you approach the world, then you're going to make a great employee. And employers are looking at things like, have you had an internship? Have you been in clubs and extracurricular activities? Have you done leadership things on campus? Because that's what's going to make you an integral part of their organization more than, can you study and give back information easily?

MIKE

I, in a previous life, I was the Editor, General Manager of several weekly newspapers and magazines. And when I was hiring reporters or advertising people, and they were fresh out of college, not one time did I ever ask what was your GPA. It was show me your portfolio. What...what have you done? Show me you're a well-rounded individual. Um,

simply because you had a 4.0 didn't mean you could write. And if you had a, you know, 2.5, that didn't mean anything either. Um, so, I...I hear what you're saying, and I think, you know, it's an important message that we send forward to...to students. In your role, do you see employers, over the years, have they changed their views on leadership from a student perspective? Or...or has it always been, show me what you can do not necessarily what...what good grades you have?

ROBERTA

You know, it has always been really show me what you can do and who you are, because employers are savvy enough to know that I can teach you technical skills. I can impart technical skills in you. What I can't impart to you is a work ethic and a sense of diligence and responsibility, and a sense of commitment to serve others. And...and when I talk to students about this, I bring a huge chunk of humility because I look at my college years as largely quite wasted. Um, I graduated with a 3.9 plus GPA with my...for my bachelor's degree, in my bachelor studies. And...and absolutely nothing to show to an employer other than that 3.9 GPA because I focused on studying and performing in the classroom. And I did work outside of the classroom, but I never worked in my field. I never ventured or had the confidence to try an internship because I thought, why would anyone hire me? I don't have, you know, I don't have real great, really great, uh, substantive subject matter skills or expertise. I was a first generation college student and I was clueless. And so, what I face my work with, my job, is a passion to get our students not to see themselves as I saw myself in college, but to see themselves as young professionals and to see themselves as somebody as someone that has something to offer an employer, even if it's just their desire to learn, uh, and desire to serve. And one of the things that I'm grateful to Montgomery College for, and I've been here 32 years, is that I consider that Montgomery College has taught me more about life and people than I ever learned, uh, in a classroom. And I appreciate Montgomery College for teaching me.

MIKE

When...when you look at your college days and then you had this 3.9, you know, the path that you took. What...what enlightened you to be able to tell our students there's more to college than just studying and getting that 3.9? But...because you...you obviously take a great deal of passion and put a great deal of passion into the students you work with, the...the employers you work with, but it....it's a little bit different than the path you took. With...what was that moment that transformed you?

ROBERTA

Well, I...I've been extraordinarily lucky. I...I sort of backed into my career passion. Um, I went to graduate school in the subject totally unrelated to my undergraduate studies. As an undergraduate I majored in Criminal Justice, and I thought I wanted to be an attorney. And I discovered that I didn't want to be an attorney. Uh, in my junior year when I took a class taught in Socratic Method like many law schools teach, uh, and I said this is not for me. And then I...I thought I wanted to be in parole or probation, and I visited my

first prison and I said, this is not for me. I...I can't work in a system that's so oppressive and that so destroys people and then expects them to go on with their lives as if nothing's happened to them. Um, and I'm not saying those are bad career fields, I'm just saying that...that for me those were not good choices. I'm...I'm much too, um, emotionally connected to my work and it would have destroyed me. I discovered in graduate school that I liked teaching and I liked interacting with students and I liked being with students and I decided, my parents used to tease me that you...you're a professional student, you never wanted to leave school. And so really what happened was I took a job at Montgomery College in a Tutoring Center and then stumbled into the Career Center work and the light bulb went off. This is what I never had. This is what I want to give to people. Uh, somebody that can hear them say, I'm 22 and I'm confused, or I'm 26 and I'm confused, and not say, well, you're way behind, you need to get yourself together, but rather say, wow, I was confused too. I hear you. I understand you. Let's talk about resources. Let's get you connected with things that will help you. And...and that's, I think, that's where my passion comes from, is that...that experience falling in love with the College.

MIKE

Well, and that...that passion clearly comes through when...when talking with you or seeing the correspondence from you. Um, it's a...it's a leadership, sense of leadership that we don't necessarily think about, but you are providing leadership to the students that you're dealing with, uh, and telling them, look there's...there's more out there than what may just be right in front of you at this particular moment, because what was right in front of you at that particular moment in college wasn't what you ended up being doing.

ROBERTA

Absolutely, and I...I want them to be gentle with themselves because one of the things that was remarkable was how many times a week when I first started in...in what then were the Career and Transfer Centers, uh, how many times a week a student would come in to me and say, I'm 19 and I don't know what I want to do. I'm so far behind, or I'm 27 and I don't know what I want to do. I'm so far behind. What's wrong with me? And I would look at them and say, you know, I'm 33 and I don't know what I want to do. That's what makes life exciting. Let's think about what the next steps are. And I would, I, as a leader, what I want to do is...is lead people to be kind to themselves, lead people to accept themselves where they are, lead people to focus on what's the next step in that journey. And once I get the next step or two, I may get over that next [inaudible] and be able to see the horizon, which I can't see right now.

MIKE

As...as a leader, do you find that hard to impart that knowledge to students that to take grace on themselves? Are they willing to do that, or are they really hard on themselves?

ROBERTA

You know, Mike, I hear people every day say things, people my age, which I don't want to talk about my age, [Laughing], people my age talk about, you know, this generation is not XYZ. This generation is just not responsible. This generation is not committed. This generation whatever, whatever. And I laugh and I push back and I say I've been immersed in what you're referring to as this generation, um, since 1990. And the generations that I've seen come through Montgomery College are so committed, so flexible, so optimistic, so committed to service that I'm inspired every day by our students. Um, and so, I do find that...that what they, what happens to them when I look at them and say you're not behind. You're...you're you, and...and your journey is...is different from everybody else's journey. Is that they deflate and they relax and that tension kind of goes out, and...and that's what I appreciate seeing and I enjoy seeing. Before I was an Employer Services Specialist, I was a Student Services Specialist, and I enjoyed seeing a student walk out of my office after having come in saying, oh, I'm...I'm, you know, I'm just, uh, a cook at McDonald's, and I enjoyed them leaving my office with a resume that looked at all of the qualities that they had to embody to be a cook at McDonald's. They had to understand safety protocols. They had to understand policies and procedures. They had to understand food safety. And all of a sudden, someone who walked into my office with what I think of as a case of the justs. I'm just this, I'm just that, was leaving my office thinking I'm a professional. I'm...what I do matters. What I do takes skill. Um, and...and that was one of the great joys of my career--has been one of the great joys of my career at Montgomery College, is seeing those students walk out the door. Um, a quick story. I ran into a student about five years ago at Costco, um, and he was a student that was, uh, that was an international student from, uh, Iran. And he had been a student at the...at the tutoring center where I worked. And he was constantly in the tutoring center many more hours than was required for that were required for his classes. And some of my colleagues used to say, oh, you know, he's always here. What's wrong with him? Why doesn't he go out and do things? Why doesn't he...he's always...always here. Well, I ran into him in Costco and he recognized me. And as soon as he said something to me, I recognized him because who could forget that face. And he's a neurosurgeon. [Laughing] **[MIKE: Wow, wow]**. And he looked at me and he said, you know, I always felt welcome when you were at the lab because you never kind of rolled your eyes at me like why are you here again. You appreciated me for who was.

MIKE

And that's a wonderful story.

ROBERTA

That's...it was wonderful. It was so wonderful to see him. Um, so, yeah.

MIKE

And I..I love this conversation about the different generations because, you know, and...and we've all been guilty of it at times. But I, you know, I do a lot of work at the

College with the Sustainable Development Goals, and just trying to...to get faculty through this fellowship that we offer to understand the importance of the SDGs and working with...with students, and I often tell the faculty that students take such a...a positive approach to restoring this planet that my generation has done such a great job of destroying. And it's the leadership of those students that really comes out in cleaning up our waterways, you know, repairing, uh, problems within our communities. And...and students, if you give them the opportunity to demonstrate leadership, will just jump at the...the chance. They...they really engage in that process of...of ownership and taking agency over a problem. We just have to allow them to do that.

ROBERTA

And...and...and shout out to all the people in Student Life. Um, and I'm gonna single out Hanna Stocks and Nik Sushka who were involved. And...and Hannah still is involved in service learning because the students want to make a difference. And I meet students who are working 30 and 40 hours a week just to keep a roof over their heads as well as study. And they're still finding a way to volunteer. So, I...I tend not to have to be too patient with folks who criticize this generation. Um, this generation is jaw dropping to me.

MIKE

Yeah, they've done some amazing things, and I think they'll continue to do some amazing things. As we begin to wrap up this episode, what kind of leaders Roberta Buckberg?

ROBERTA

I...I know it's a bit cliché because everyone's talking about servant leadership, but I'm...I'm a servant leader because what I want to do when I say hello to somebody on the phone or in email or in person, hopefully, more as we come back, uh, is I want to be able to meet their expectations and send them on their way with a little bit more knowledge, a little bit more positive feeling about the day, a little bit better off than when they first came in contact with me. So, I'm here to do something for other people. I...I kind of believe that the whole purpose of being on the planet is leaving something or someone in a better place than...than you found them, and that's really what I want to do and that's...that's the kind of leader I am. Um, I also like to lead by example. And I don't want to get off on a whole other tangent, but one of the things is, um, I'm a passionate vegan because I believe that being a vegan is good for the planet, good for the people, good for everybody's health, and, but, I don't shove it at people. I try and just, you know, live my life and have people ask me, well, why don't you eat eggs and dairy? Why don't you do this? And then, I explain and I don't harang, and I don't demand. I just try and be...and be of service.

MIKE

Well, you do a great job at it. I appreciate it. Uh, one thing I...I will share with you is that I don't think you have to ever apologize for sending emails late on a Friday afternoon, on

a weekend because the work you're doing is work for our students. And, uh, it's not something you have to apologize for. Keep...keep doing what you're doing. Uh, I...I think we need it.

ROBERTA

Thank you, Mike. I just...I always want to be sensitive to the fact that I work with the hardest working and best colleagues in the world. This is an institution that really, really has made me feel like I'm a family member for 32, for 31 plus years at this point.

MIKE

Well, we appreciate it. I appreciate you taking time out of your busy schedule and meet with me today to have this conversation. Thank you.

ROBERTA

You are welcome. Thanks, Mike.

MIKE

If you know someone who you think would be a great fit for this podcast, have them reach out to me at michael.mills@montgomerycollege.edu. Meanwhile, keep moving MC Forward.