

Student finds success the second time around

by Jennifer Monroe - Wednesday, April 27, 2011

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On Jason Garland's first day of class, he had a lot on his mind.

He wondered if he, at age 26, would fit in with his younger peers. He was concerned about using unfamiliar technology that his instructors would require him to learn. And he thought about his first attempt at earning his bachelor's degree, nearly seven and a half years earlier.

The struggle to assimilate back into the academic setting, after he had been away from it for so long, gave Garland anxiety.

But three and a half years, nearly 130 credits and three internships later, Garland is just weeks from walking the stage at commencement to receive his bachelor of business administration degree in accounting.

Through external support and internal motivation, Garland overcame his struggles.

A college, a career and a crisis

Garland first attended college at Michigan Technological University in 1999, right out of high school. When he was forced to change his major, he said his commitment to school dwindled.

"I found out that the specific engineering program I wanted had been phased out. Instead, I enrolled in chemical engineering, but it was not what I wanted," he said.

Garland went to class less and became more social in his fraternity. Eventually his grades slipped, and he found himself with a low GPA and little enthusiasm for his program.

After leaving school in 2002, Garland moved to Appleton, then to Minnesota and eventually started working as a senior account executive at a mortgage company in 2003.

"I enjoyed the work, and I enjoyed helping people and businesses get loans," Garland said. But enjoyment in his work came to a halt when faced with the tough prospects of the mortgage crisis in 2007.

Garland had a tough decision to make. He could keep living paycheck to paycheck in an industry he began to fall out of love with or he could turn his life upside down and go back to finish his bachelor's degree.

"I applied for a few different sales positions, but I knew that if I wanted to stop worrying about a fluctuating income, I needed to finish my degree," Garland said.

He left his lifestyle, livelihood and comfort zone when he committed himself to returning to college.

"I sold my home, got rid of my car and moved to Wisconsin," Garland explained. "I became a college student overnight."

A second chance and a revival of determination

After overcoming his initial concerns of fitting in, using new technology and being successful, Garland flourished in the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh's College of Business. As an accounting major, he studied subjects like cost management, auditing and tax accounting.

He was able to transfer some credits from MTU and was given academic amnesty for his low GPA. Under this policy, Garland's prior grades were excluded from his official cumulative GPA.

"I got a second chance with academic amnesty," Garland said. "A lot has happened since I was in college the first time, and UW Oshkosh recognized that."

Garland was admitted to the University under the condition that he improve his grades, a task he took seriously from the start.

"I knew I had the fundamental skills I needed to be successful in school. After I got above a 3.8 grade point average my first semester, I had the momentum I needed to continue," Garland said.

One of his professors, Steven Makar, said he remembers Garland most for his dedication and leadership potential.

"I had Jason as a student in two cost management courses. I require a lot of group work, and Jason inevitably became the cohesive and leading force in each group," Makar said. "He works hard in the courses and is very involved with learning outside of the classroom."

Makar said that Garland is one of a few students who pursued certification through the Certificate of Management Accounting (CMA) as a junior. Garland showed his willingness to help his peers by sharing his experiences with Makar's CMA question and answer session this spring.

"He talked about his experience in a direct and helpful way. He was very transparent in discussing the struggles he overcame, and he helped students a great deal," Makar explained.

This helpfulness is something Garland hopes to translate into the workforce.

"Public accountants have a breadth of knowledge and help people make good financial decisions," Garland said. "I want to use what I know to help people and companies."

Accomplishing goal brings new thoughts

Just as he did on his first day of class, now that Garland is only a couple weeks from graduation, he has a lot on his mind.

Garland thinks about how much he's looking forward to starting a job immediately after the semester ends. He will work as an auditor of financial institutions for a national accounting firm.

He thinks about the support he received from his friends, wife, professors and family members. He also thinks about his determination, which got him through the difficult transition of returning to college.

"I had to do something to open more doors for myself," Garland said. "I did more at UW Oshkosh than I thought possible, and I'm thankful UWO gave me the chance to prove to them and myself that I could do it."