TOUCH OF GRACE

SMU's compulsory Finishing Touch course builds well-rounded graduates by including community service

WHEN TODAY arrived at Ruth Chiang's office, she was having an impromptu chat with Singapore Management University (SMU) students who had "popped by" with a community project idea.

This is normal protocol for the director of career services, who encourages students to "just come in and bounce ideas off" her.

With the responsibility of preparing students for the real world after graduation, Ms Chiang created the innovative Finishing Touch — a compulsory, graded SMU module. It imparts resume writing, personal grooming and interesting skills.

Ms Chiang is also in charge of ensuring that all SMU students contribute 80 hours of community service. She set up the SMU OnTrack system, an online portal on which volunteers and project beneficiaries can submit requests and offers for services.

During her 24 years with the People's Association, Ms Chiang served as project leader in the redevelopment of Outward Bound Singapore in 1991. She was also the first coordinator of the Community Development Council programmes that began in 1997.

She tells CHEOW XIN YI why she believes in what she does.

Why introduce the Finishing Touch programme? When we began building up the career services office, we realised many of the skills that fresh graduates lack need to be trained for were not systematically packaged.

Many people think they can write a CV. But they fall short. That can do you an injustice because you might have a lot more about you that is not reflected in it; the CV goes into the boardroom before you do! Writing a good cover letter throws the spotlight on you and tells the employer: "I have a great match for your organisation."

But why grade students in a course like this? Grading the subject tells the students that we are serious about this and we want you to excel in it.

They have to submit their CVs, be assessed at real dine-outs for their social dining etiquette, and also their interviewing skills in taped sessions with professional human resource practitioners. There are different criteria for grading, but the final grade counts toward their final Grade Point Average (GPA).

Do students actually fail? Students fail mainly because of a couldn't-care-less attitude, or they missed their dine-out sessions or interviews. Sometimes, they do not put effort into their CV, simply making a list of events or their grades. They might as well just send in their transcript!

There weren't that many people who failed; only one or two cases so far, but it's not easy to score either, because getting a job is not easy. We want you to work hard and practise at it while you are in school. If you cannot pass your Finishing Touch, you cannot get your internship and, guess what, nobody owes you a living.

Why make community service part of a career services programme? We do not want our students to go out being arrogant and selfish. They need to learn teamwork and know the needs of society; without the community, companies can't thrive. It's a symbiotic relationship.

At first, they go in grudgingly, but when they see people less fortunate than them and the vast number of needs out there, many of my students actually do more than 80 hours. They come back as leaders and impact new students to do more.

Since it is a compulsory course, there will always be those who just ride on the bandwagon, but you try to touch as many students as you can and hope they will change.

How do you grade community service? Community service is graded either as a pass or fail. We do not want our students to go out being arrogant and selfish. If you are through your community service, we let them know the needs of society; without the community, companies can't thrive. It's a symbiotic relationship.

And, most times, when my students' CVs go out, the talking point is always community service.

A good GPA is a given, but the companies find out who you really are through your community service record: Is the person a team player? Is he compassionate? What drives him and makes him tick? Does he have integrity and responsibility?

A major problem for most people is working with others; either they don't fit into the culture or they are too self-centred. Community service can build EQ (emotional intelligence quotient), communication and project management skills — all important applications in the real world. Cross-cultural experiences are especially excellent.

I've seen people coming back from community projects in Timor Leste and Vietnam less self-centred, more tolerant and appreciative of what they have.

How do you get disinterested students to open up to the idea? We give students a briefing before they go out for their community service. We let them conceive ideas and work directly with the beneficiaries.

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