

Lifetime Learning Brings Personal Progress by Degrees

Donald W. Mitchell

Here's an often-praised pathway for career success: Get a great college education at a top school, follow with a graduate degree at another fine school, learn as much as you can by working under a wonderful mentor at a top organization, keep an eye out for opportunities, and start your own company with a terrific idea. But that pathway isn't available to very many people. Think of this pathway as being more like a thin elastic rope strung across a ravine that you have to cross by balancing yourself very carefully.

If you don't follow that pathway, does that mean you can't have a great career? "Absolutely not," says Paul Robere, Ph.D. who leads Robere & Associates (Thailand), one of Asia's largest training and consulting companies, in pointing to his route to lifetime learning.

Dr. Robere started his higher education at 19 as a ministerial student but found he wasn't ready for the experience. After two stabs at a college education, he joined the U.S. Navy and gained valuable skills in weather forecasting and computers which culminated in running a computer center for an admiral in Guam. After leaving the service, his track record and knowledge translated into excellent jobs working on computer design, development, and manufacturing with *Fortune* 500 firms. In his "spare" time he started college again, first at a junior college and eventually at Pepperdine University where he earned his undergraduate degree.

Dr. Robere had a special skill that impressed people who met him: He could really teach others. While in the Navy, he was asked to teach weather forecasting, and after graduating from Pepperdine, he added business, math, human resources, small business organization and development to his teaching repertoire while working at Orange Coast College.

Wanting more stimulation, he joined the Naval Reserve and was soon asked to join legendary quality guru Dr. W. Edwards Deming to develop quality processes for the U.S. Navy. From this experience, he developed a deep understanding of how to improve processes to deliver more quality.

Following his work with Dr. Deming, Dr. Robere took on the assignment to start up a disk-drive manufacturing unit in Singapore. After checking out the rest of Asia, he decided that Thailand was a better location. After succeeding at this difficult task, Dr. Robere decided the time had come to put up his shingle and he opened Robere & Associates (Thailand) at age 51.

Much success followed, but at 53 Dr. Robere realized it was time to finish his "100 mile journey" of gaining a formal education and earn a doctorate. Most people, by comparison, start that educational trek at 22. Because he was a busy CEO, the degree had

to be squeezed into an already full schedule. Being based in Thailand meant that a distance-based education would be the most practical.

After careful consideration, Dr. Robere selected Rushmore University for his doctoral studies. He found that Rushmore provided him with the flexibility to structure a course of learning that would be directly applicable to his already successful career. Rather than working with ivory tower academics, Rushmore provided supervision from professors with “real world” experience and knowledge of practical theory. In fact, his senior advisor for the dissertation had experienced a similar career and had gained many valuable insights into the consulting field. The impressive credentials of prior Rushmore graduates also encouraged Dr. Robere to pursue his studies at that university. He also looked forward to the writing-intensive Rushmore curriculum to improve his already good success with writing books and papers through gaining feedback from fellow Rushmore students and advisors.

Various delays kept Dr. Robere from completing his degree at that time, but he kept his intention firm and restated doctoral studies at age 60. How impressive is that?

Dr. Robere felt happy about his decision when faculty members Alan Guinn, Lee Hargrave, and Jerry Craigie sent personal e-mails welcoming him to the university. He felt like he was in the capable hands of fellow professionals with whom he could share experiences and learn from. After all, Dr. Deming used to start classes when he was 93 by saying, “We’re all here to learn.”

While restarting his doctoral training, Dr. Robere had one concern: He had learned that many Ph.D.s are hopelessly impractical and some can barely function in the real world from having had dozens of Ph.D.s who graduated from a prestigious university working for him.

But if you mix 30 to 40 years of experience with a self-created, guided program of contribution and discovery, you should certainly have something of value from a doctoral degree. And that’s just what Dr. Robere achieved. The doctoral program provided him with a platform for new discovery and also surprised him by bringing back lost memories of discoveries he had made earlier.

How did this final degree affect this very successful man?

More pleasant surprises waited. Dr. Robere shares his thoughts with us:

“When I received the email informing me of my ‘grade’ and the subsequent awarding of a degree, I *felt* different. All of a sudden, I started laying out plans for other research I wanted to do. More articles to write, more training courses to develop...I was living out a self-fulfilling prophesy. If I were going to be called ‘Dr. Paul,’ then I damned well start acting like it and do the things that I would expect someone with a title like that to do.

“So, what's the point!?! Well, the point is, like the international environmental standard

ISO14001, a degree from an institution like Rushmore is not so much an indicator based on artificial guidelines of what a person did in the past, but the potential of what they *will* do in the future.”

Today, Dr. Robere is living a more fulfilled and successful life and career because of his lifetime learning activities. He hopes you, too, will follow this alternate path to great success and satisfaction regardless of how your education started by keeping up with lifetime learning that builds on your life experiences.

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Donald W. Mitchell is a professor at Rushmore University. For more information about ways to engage in fruitful lifelong learning at Rushmore, visit

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