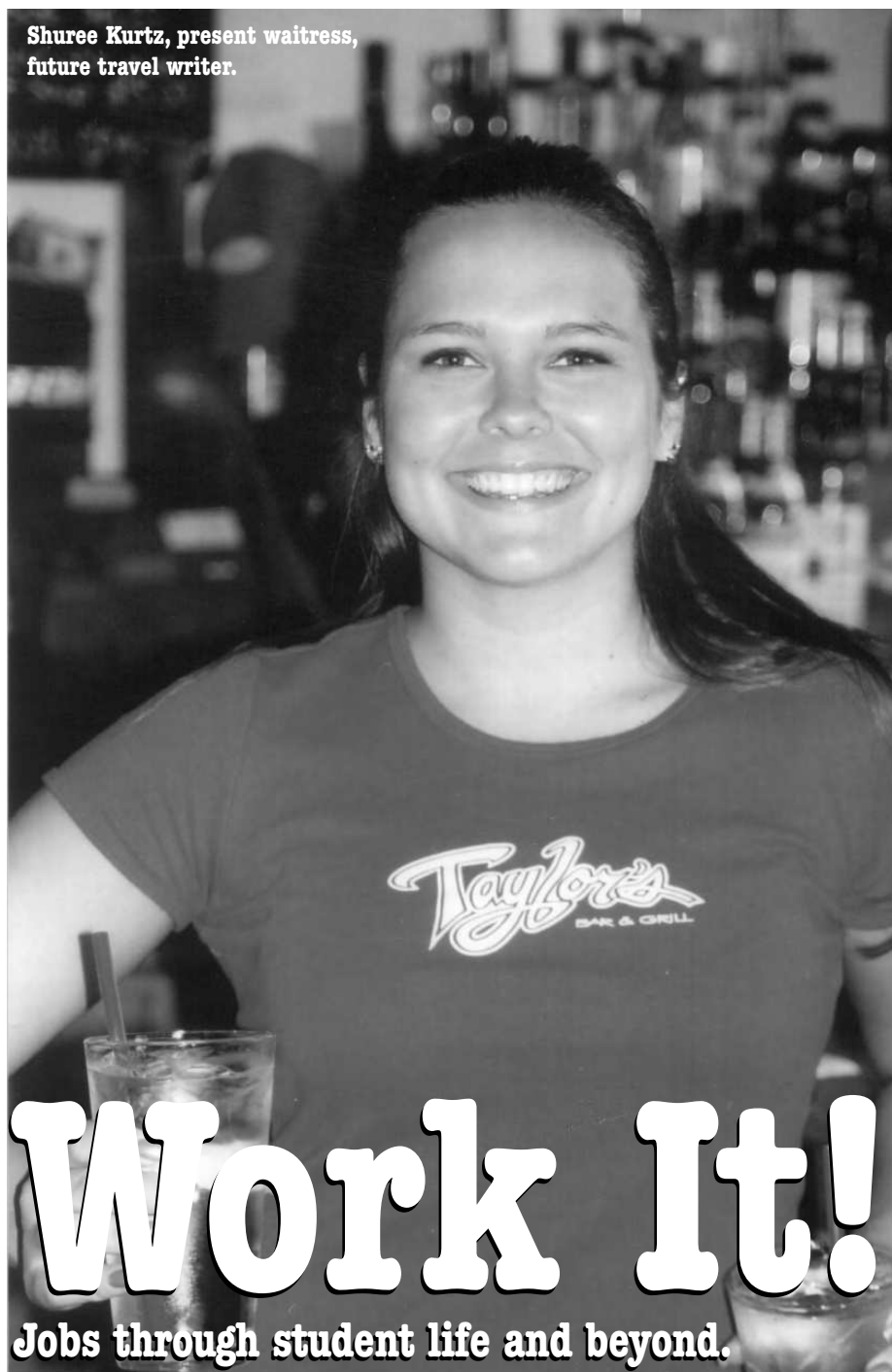


Shuree Kurtz, present waitress, future travel writer.



Work It!

Jobs through student life and beyond.

By Bobbie Willis

A year ago I got lucky and landed a great gig teaching writing at the university. Sixteen students, a 10-week term. First day of the term, even before I am struck by their youth, I am struck by their attention, their aye-aye-captain attitude for what lies ahead in the term. They take notes with sharp pencils and fresh fine-point Uniball pens in notebooks that are crisp and smooth as new linens. It surprises me that this eagerness, though it wavers during fifth-week midterms and sputters a bit before finals, stays pretty much intact throughout our time together. These young people manage to balance impressive academic loads with part-time jobs, active (I suspect sometimes overly active) social lives, club or volunteer work,

and even occasionally partners and children. They seem focused on the here and now, the things to be learned right this moment. What to do with all this learning, however, still remains a little fuzzy.

Work and jobs are constant themes for the students. Given an economy that feels less sympathetic than usual toward writerly types, the question of how to make a future living comes up again and again. But work and jobs also play a role for many of these students through their college years. All told, I have 48 students over the three-term school year. At least one-third of them work during the school year to help pay for their education, or to earn the mad money that subsidizes the social life part of their education.

One young man works part time as the manager of his apartment building and part time as a Wal-Mart clerk. Another puts together website info for The Caddis Fly fishing shop. One young woman, a few weeks into the term, quits her job as a telemarketer, just in time for her freezer to break down, ruining nearly \$100 worth of groceries. According to UO Career Center Director Larry Smith, the number of students overall at the UO who work during the academic school year fluctuates between 40 and 70 percent "depending on the survey and the point in time."



'I've applied for numerous jobs, too many to count. ...'
— Ashlin Salisbury

I find that there are no dramatic differences in class schedule conflicts or deadline problems between these working students and their job-free classmates. Says Smith, "Obviously so much depends on the individual student, but there are studies that show that working while in college, your grades go up. You get more efficient at your studying; you get better at managing your time, using it effectively. There are students who are working 40 hours a week, taking a full academic load and have a family." I have one or two of these individuals during the year, and I have to agree with Smith when he says, "I mean, those are stars in their own way, to be able to manage all of that." In terms of how such a busy schedule might adversely affect a student's grades, which may not look so hot to prospective employers, Smith explains, "Yeah, they may lament, 'Gee, I wish my grades had been a little bit better. But let me tell you what I was doing.' And the student's job, of course, is to communicate that to employers, who may worry about things like GPA."

I start each term by talking a little about jobs, dream jobs in particular. "What's your dream job?" I ask them. "Travel writer," says one. "Sports writer," replies another. "Teaching," says yet another. One girl falters a little, opens and closes her mouth once, then twice, shakes her head, smiles and says, "I have no idea. I just have no idea." A couple of students look at her then look at me. I nod, "Great," I say. "No problem. There's plenty of time to figure it all out, plenty of time to put the bigger picture together." All of them, even the would-be travel writer, sports writer and teacher, seem relieved.

Ryan Earley, a student in the Honors College, is tall of height and broad of shoulders, with a shock of dark hair over an imposing brow and blue eyes. After a class

where a freelance writer comes in to guest speak about the work involved in pitching successful query letters and the effort it takes to build self-sufficiency as a writer, I ask the students for feedback on the presentation. Ryan offers, "Well, I don't know. With all it takes to free-lance, I kind of wonder if I shouldn't just apply to law school."

For now, Ryan is sticking with writing and has decided to apply for a part-time job during school as an academic tutor. It will be his first effort at trying to work during the school year. Over the course of an average

year, his expenses are: zero for tuition, thanks to a scholarship he receives (resident tuition and fees run about \$4,875; international students pay \$16,416, according to the UO Financial Aid website); \$600 for books; \$3,800 for rent; \$2,500 for groceries; \$800 for gas and transportation; \$1,800 for car insurance; \$400 for broadband Internet service; and \$1,000 for general spending. (He does say, however, general spending money "fluctuates depending mostly on how much money there is in the bank account to begin with ... and whether or not I have a girlfriend at the time — what can I say, I'm a fool for the ladies.")

Ryan covers his expenses with the scholarship, summer jobs, and an occasional financial pitch-in from his folks. About the summer jobs, Ryan says, "I have worked terrible temp jobs every summer since I started college. They are easy to find and ask no commitment of you, but are always mindless and occasionally hurt. This summer, I have packed soy cheese, unloaded semi trailers full of dishes, folded T-shirts, scanned inventory for Nordstrom, put away and picked stock for various warehouses and worked on an assembly line that manufactured keyless entry devices." As for the income, he says, "I have saved nearly all of it, but the work has been less than steady and the paychecks have tended to be small."

Maybe two-thirds of the students in my classes know what they want to do after graduation, but even they seem to have only a vague idea of how to get from where they are in school to where they want to be when they get out of school. "There's an internship coordinator right in this building," I say. "Do you know about her? Have you been to the career center?" They stare at me a little blankly, a polite, collective stare that yawns and says, "Huh, you don't say?"



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