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CHRIS DAVIS: You are listening to the *Career and Academic Resource Center Podcast*. Welcome to the *Career and Academic Resource Center Podcast*. And my name is Chris Davis. I'm the Associate Director of the Career and Academic Resource Center here at the Harvard Extension School. And I'm here with Alexander De Luca, who just graduated with his government ALM, I think.

ALEXANDER DE Yup, that's right. Yeah, great. I'm very happy to be here.

LUCA:

CHRIS DAVIS: So I basically just wanted to have kind of a fun conversation today, ask you a little bit about what your student experience was like working full-time while you were doing the degree. Talk about some of your interests, talk about if there's anything that you would share or advice that you would have for new or incoming students. So just kind of touching on all of that.

ALEXANDER DE Awesome.

LUCA:

CHRIS DAVIS: So right when you started at the Harvard, you knew about the Extension School and you wanted to take courses here. Did you have a degree in mind at that point, or you worked up to that?

ALEXANDER DE No, to be honest with you, I had never considered grad school. And my dad very gleefully reminded me at

LUCA: commencement a few weeks ago that when he suggested grad school several years ago, I told him it would never happen.

So when I started at the School of Public Health on the communications team there, I was told about the Extension School program and how it's sort of built for people who work full-time.

And curiosity sort of got the best of me, and I took a look at the course catalog. And my own personal interest in politics and government sort of pushed me towards the government track and I thought, I'll take a few classes, see how it goes, see if I can manage the course load.

And I forget what the time period was, but shortly after I started there, I registered for some summer classes. I did the three courses in the pro seminar that you take early on, and I absolutely loved it. I found that my previous stance on grad school was incredibly misguided, and that I really love learning.

Being back in class made me feel like I was sort of activating parts of my brain that had been dormant for a while in a very positive way. I was feeling more creative. I felt like I was-- I don't know. I don't know how to describe it.

I felt like I was being more productive with my life. Even though you work 40 hours a week, but after a certain number of months, your job sort of just becomes routine. And this was something where every term it was a new subject, a new way of thinking, whether it was the pro seminar, which was really writing intensive, or it was something more philosophical.

I took a philosophy of government course or it was statistics, which I admittedly didn't do great in because I always do poorly in statistics. But--

CHRIS DAVIS: Are there any classes that you remember being standouts or that you enjoyed for whatever reason?

ALEXANDER DE LUCA: Absolutely. So a class that's going to stick with me forever-- I think the title was Opioids and Addiction in

America.

CHRIS DAVIS: Yes, I actually wrote down. I just--

ALEXANDER DE LUCA: Oh, yeah--

CHRIS DAVIS:

I just needed a refresher.

ALEXANDER DE LUCA: That was probably the best class I have taken, even including all undergrad and graduate school combined. It

was a perfect representation really of what the Extension School offers. The topic was something I knew very little about, but I learned a ton about it. It was very engaging in the way the class was structured.

There was a lot of discussion. It was a smaller class. So it allowed for a lot of one on one time with the instructor. And the classmates that I had were from such different backgrounds than myself and each other that every conversation was so interesting because we're talking about something as serious as opioids.

And on the one hand, we had a very young student just out of high school who was taking this as a summer school course. And then on the other hand, we had someone who was well into her retirement and knew that she had an opioid prescription in her future and wanted to learn about it before she embarked on that medical journey for herself.

And so everyone really brought something to the table. The younger student brought his memories of how high schoolers currently think about this because it wasn't an issue when any of us, the rest of us in the class were in high school. But he gave us that firsthand experience of how teenagers talk about it and how they feel about it.

And everyone just-- it made me think in ways I hadn't thought about subjects in a while, and it-- I don't know. It just really stood out as definitely the best class of the entire degree, I think.

CHRIS DAVIS: That's really interesting.

ALEXANDER DE LUCA: Yeah, it was great. Many of my classes were on campus with an online option. So that worked really well if I had a

work obligation, an event I had to be at, or something with my family where I just simply couldn't miss it. If I had to miss an in-person class, lots of times, they were also recorded so I could go back and watch the class before the next session and I was able to catch up.

And many of the classes also had online sections. So if for whatever reason I wasn't able to make a class, oftentimes, in section, we could go over the readings or whatever just to make sure that I had understood everything, which was very helpful and something I also didn't really expect going into it thinking that that would be a part of it.

CHRIS DAVIS: And so the diversity of the students that you remarked on in the opioid class, was that something that you saw in other classes too, or did it vary--

ALEXANDER DE Oh, absolutely. Yeah, it definitely varies class to class. But overall, that's, I think, a huge draw for the Extension

LUCA: School just because being exposed to different viewpoints and different backgrounds makes you step back and consider issues and opinions that you've held in different ways.

And oftentimes, it can lead to forming better opinions because you've now heard from people on the other side of the fence, or politically, or from different areas of the world.

A lot of international students who brought really interesting perspectives because they were coming at the topics of government with entirely different histories. Their countries had different political systems, they had different political parties.

And so when we talked about issues like human rights, my brain sort of wired to view debates over signing a treaty or something like that is a Democrat or Republican thing. But when I have four international students in my class as well, suddenly it forces me to think more globally, which is a really nice benefit.

CHRIS DAVIS: That's really interesting.

ALEXANDER DE In many of the classes, there were current or former politicians from other countries who were coming here to
LUCA: Cambridge to take a few classes on campus. And their experiences as people who were really on the front lines campaigning and acting as public servants back in their home countries was really-- I felt very fortunate to be able to pick their brains about it.

CHRIS DAVIS: Your degree was in government. Is that where your interest lies? And is that kind of what led you to-- so let me see if I got this right. So you were the communications project manager before the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. And then your current role is director of communications and outreach for the Malcolm Wiener Center at the Kennedy School.

ALEXANDER DE That's right.

LUCA:

CHRIS DAVIS: OK.

ALEXANDER DE Yeah. So government and politics had always been an interest of mine just growing up. In high school, AP history

LUCA: was one of my favorite courses. It was US history. We traveled to Washington, got to meet our congressmen. And that's really what sparked the love for it in my past.

But I started pursuing this degree because of that personal interest. And the classes that I took and the things that I learned through the Extension School are what reignited that passion a little bit and led me to take my career over to the Kennedy School where I'm now, like you said, at the Malcolm Wiener Center for Social Policy.

And my job there I get to focus on issues that affect domestic social policy like inequality, achievement gap and schools in the United States, criminal justice and law enforcement, and all these things that are really pressing issues for the country. And it's extremely fulfilling to be able to participate in issues that I really care about and that I know matter to my community.

So I don't know if I would have made the decision or started to look at the opportunities available at the Kennedy School had I not pursued the degree through the Extension School.

CHRIS DAVIS: Do you think that the classes that you took prepared you well for this role? Because I'm looking at some of the courses you took, censorship, legal issues, truth, knowledge, and democracies, human rights, international politics. I'm guessing the content in a lot of these courses prepared you well for this role--

ALEXANDER DE LUCA: Absolutely. And the degree prepared me not only academically, but it reinforced that this move for me

professionally was the right move. I worry that one day it will start feeling special, but I haven't gotten to that day yet.

The most impactful day at the Kennedy School that I've been there so far is the day that the Parkland students came to speak at the forum. I think I'll remember that forever. I saved the ticket. It's on my desk. That was something else. Everyone walked out of there very moved.

CHRIS DAVIS: If you had advice for other students, things that you learned now that you've completed the degree and you've moved forward, do you have any things that you would share? I mean--

ALEXANDER DE LUCA: So I guess I can think of three completely unrelated pieces of advice. One is if you're thinking about pursuing the next stage in your education and you're not sure, just start. Just start now. If you like it, it will change your life. If you decide six months down the road that it's not for you, you can stop. But you'll never know unless you start.

And that's how it was for me. I wasn't sure whether I would like it. I wasn't-- for the longest time, I thought graduate school wasn't for me. Before the first course I ever took at the Extension School was even complete, I knew that I loved it. But I wouldn't have known that if I just kept pushing it back. So just start and see what happens because it can turn into a really incredible thing if it works for you.

The second piece of advice is I think as a general study tip, what I found was to look at my daily or weekly schedule and see where I normally have downtimes, where I'm not doing anything or I'm doing something super unproductive, like scrolling through Reddit. When I had projects, I would try and fit in some work on those projects during those times.

So for me, personally, weekend mornings were ideal because I didn't have any real responsibilities or appointments or events. Really, often, the earliest would be 10:00 AM. But I'm an early riser so I have 6:00 AM to 10:00 AM where I drink my coffee and basically do nothing on the internet for four hours. But that's when I would write my papers.

Or, immediately after work, I would often have similar periods of downtime where I told myself I was decompressing, but really wasn't getting much done. And that's also a great time to even throw in a half hour on an assignment, or something like that.

And when you do that, after the first few weeks, it becomes so normal that it doesn't seem like a burden at all and your course load suddenly becomes much more manageable.

And then the third and final piece of advice I think is the most important, and that is to take advantage of the faculty because Harvard has some of the most incredible faculty in the world. And sure, you can just go to class and pass in your assignment and either log off or leave the room when it's done and never say another thing.

But the faculty really do want to help you learn, and they want to learn about you and they want to know how they can make you successful by just taking those few extra minutes to talk to them after class or attend office hours or shoot them an email with a question you have.

It will enrich your education and really improve the work that you do. But it will also make you feel much more fulfilled because the insight that they can provide in those times is often going to be something that you remember. So I found the accessibility of the faculty and their willingness to help just to be outstanding.

CHRIS DAVIS: In general, I've heard from a lot of people that setting a regular time and making that comfortable for you and getting used to that is really the best strategy.

ALEXANDER DE LUCA: Yeah, absolutely. It's definitely different for everyone. I'll be the first to say that the way it worked for me is not going to be the way it works for everyone. But the Extension School is sort of perfect in that way because it's so flexible.

CHRIS DAVIS: So let's talk about some fun stuff, if you wouldn't mind.

ALEXANDER DE LUCA: I like fun stuff. All right.

CHRIS DAVIS: So our student population is so diverse and so many folks have interests outside of school and work or they juggle kind of multiple things. And the reason, as we were talking about earlier, that I became aware of you was through your social media use.

And you are an avid social media user. If you don't mind talking about that a little bit. So you have a very robust Instagram account, and you have a YouTube channel too that's relatively newish.

ALEXANDER DE LUCA: Yeah, I'm sort of everywhere with varying degrees of passion in each one.

CHRIS DAVIS:

Tell us a little bit about it.

ALEXANDER DE LUCA: OK, I get excited about this. So I might be a little long-winded--

CHRIS DAVIS:

That's all right.

ALEXANDER DE LUCA: If so, I apologize. My first entrance into the social media world started back in January of 2012 when I started a subreddit called Gaybros on Reddit.com. And that was built to be a social community for gay men who felt like they didn't necessarily fit in to the gay community that they saw portrayed through mass media.

And at the time, it was sort of a response to the unwelcoming atmosphere in certain online communities, interest-based online communities, for things like sports and military issues and things like that where gay men didn't quite feel welcome. So I created this space where they could talk about those things and feel welcome, and talk with people who understood where they were coming from.

As the years went on, that became less and less necessary as the society became more accepting. And so it's sort of evolved into just a general hangout social community where people can meet new friends.

But that sort of took off quite early. And I did a lot of press around that with NPR and CBC. I was on the Huffington Post TV show-- I forget what it was called, a bunch of different things all at once. At one point, we were in talks for a reality show, which is a very good thing that it didn't happen in retrospect.

About two months ago, I got back into the YouTube world. I actually used to have a YouTube channel several years ago, took a few years off. And now I'm back at it. That's been the most fun so far.

That seems to really engage all the creative things that I like because there's a little bit of photography where I'm editing in a very similar way that I edit photos, but also sound mixing and storytelling. And I absolutely love it.

CHRIS DAVIS: And in your YouTube videos, you talk a lot about yourself. Is that kind of what you wanted? And you're storytelling--

ALEXANDER DE I do. I do.

LUCA:

CHRIS DAVIS: --your shares. One of the videos that you dedicated to entirely the commencement experience recently.

ALEXANDER DE Yeah, commencement, that's my favorite video I've made because it was such a special day for me. Harvard's

LUCA: Commencement is just like nothing else.

So I went to Northeastern for undergraduate. And Northeastern's Commencement is at the Garden. And I thought at the time that was the coolest thing ever. The Bruins play there. But then I was able to experience a Harvard Commencement and there is really nothing like that. With the sheriff walking out and declaring the meeting open in the way he's done--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

ALEXANDER DE Oh, yeah, that's-- the choir was incredible, the speakers were incredible. I've never laughed at something that

LUCA: was written in Latin before. Definitely the favorite thing I was able to film so far.

CHRIS DAVIS: Well, I wanted to say thank you for sharing all of this with me and us. Alexander, it's been a pleasure to have you as our inaugural podcast guest. So thank you very, very much for being here.

ALEXANDER DE Thank you very much for having me. It was a lot of fun.

LUCA:

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CHRIS DAVIS: You have listened to the *CARC podcast*. This is the podcast for the Career and Academic Resource Center here at Harvard Extension School, and I hope you will join us again.