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Monday, August 14, 2006

Interview with Julie Blake, Neumont University



Neumont University (www.neumont.edu) is an accredited, Salt Lake City, Utah-based University which is getting the notice of the computer industry by focusing on turning out computer science graduates with relevant industry experience. We thought it would be interesting to talk to the venture-backed University to understand how they're different, so we sat down with Julie Blake, the University's Senior Vice President of Enrollment to learn about the school.

Techrockies: Tell us, what's the school all about?

Julie Blake: Neumont University's mission is to educate the most sought after software developers in the world. We're accomplishing this mission by pioneering a breakthrough approach for high end computer science education. Our Bachelor is very different from other colleges, universities, and technical training schools like ITT Tech. The way that we are different is that our B.S. program is developed in partnership with companies like IBM, Microsoft, and other technology leaders. We have a

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project-based program, which translates core competencies in computer science to a series of projects, to complete an accelerated, accredited degree program. We're different, but what makes us different is that the program is intense and accelerated. First, our program is accelerated. Students are in the classroom from 8:00-4:00, Monday through Friday, and graduate in just two years. Next, we have re-engineered traditional computer science curriculum and our program is 70% project-based

The curriculum and classes mirror the workplace, to help our students get accustomed to working in software development in school. Our customer is the employer who will hire our graduates, and our campus and curriculum are designed to mirror the environment our students will experience in the workplace. The second way we are different is that our programs are project-based. About 70 percent of the time is spent on projects, with less time in class. Thirty percent is spent on general education--things like photography, English, in a lecture center. The computer science classes are in a project-based environment. It's very different--many schools will tell you they're a project based university, but this takes it to the extreme. We work directly with leading IT employers. We don't allow students to work on projects that would allow satellites to fall from the sky as freshmen, of course. They start out start them working on internal products until they build core competency. Then, they begin working on community projects, and eventually enterprise projects as they get closer to graduation. As part of that level of interaction with employers, we generate off-the-chart placement rates, because the employers who spend time on campus

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recognize the level of skill our kids are gaining. Our students get an average of 2.4 offers before they graduate, and 100 percent are placed in the computer science field before they graduate.

Techrockies: Who are some of the employers you are working with?

Julie Blake: The list is growing. We have IBM, Microsoft, ACS, Novell, RemedyMD, MWI, Johnson & Johnson, and Fidelity, just to name a few. There are many, many more.

Techrockies: How long has the school been around?

Julie Blake: We were founded in 2002, and our first graduates entered the workforce in March of this year. Our second group will graduate in June.

Techrockies: Where did the idea for the school come from?

Julie Blake: The three founders of Neumont, one in particular, had deep roots in software development. He was keenly aware of the fact that most complex applications fail. In a standards group survey it's reported that 92 percent of complex applications fail to be delivered on time, on target, or within budget. The industry's dirty little secret is that employer's can't hire people directly out of a university that have skills to go directly on a project. There are not enough software developers with architecture and project management skills out of school. Software developers require 12 to 18 months of training before they can be put on a project. The Neumont founders concluded that if a university became directly focused on helping students gain skills to become employable in industry, they would be entering a waiting workforce. Computer science

enrollment has been declining in U.S. Universities since 2000. But, if you talk to any CIO, the limiting factor on their ability to build new applications that differentiate and scale their business is the limited talent in the IT workforce.

There's a bit of dissonance, isn't there--we all know people in the technology area who are unemployed, and we've all read that programming jobs are going offshore. The reality is if all you know how to do is program, and computer science classes just teach theory and programming skills--your job likely will go offshore. If you can work on the business side-- leadership, and soft skills--and also have the latest understanding of technology in application development and other experiences such as system administration--you are very, very employable. Placements and salary data show that the average salary for our graduating class is \$60,622 at 100 percent placement. Our graduates are entering the workforce at high salaries and have been hitting the ground running.

The notion was that we could found a university that could solve this industry-wide problem--the need for accredited, candidates who possess Bachelor of Science degrees and can work on the business side.

Techrockies: I've heard university accreditation is pretty tough. How did your school go about getting accreditation?

Julie Blake: The way we got accredited is we bought an accredited school in Reno, and opened a branch university that became Neumont. That school is accredited by the ACICS at the Master's level. As an accredited school, Neumont is highly monitored and regulated by the U.S. department of education, for things such as

financial stability and the quality of our academic programs.

Techrockies: How many students do you have enrolled?

Julie Blake: We have 275 enrolled at the school. We have students who come into our programs quarterly, four times a year. Our student population is diverse, coming from 44 U.S. states. By October, we'll have students from all but two states in our student population. We also have students from eight foreign countries. They're all here in Salt Lake City--none of our programs are available online.

Techrockies: I had heard the founders had some background in venture capital?

Julie Blake: They were in the financial industry. The president of the university spent a great portion of his career in Wall Street, and the original founders understood how companies get venture funding. Neumont is institutionally funded, which is not that unusual in higher education. Great Hill Partners is the backer for Neumont.

Techrockies: How do you respond to people who say that by focusing on what employers want graduates are missing out on important computer science theory?

Julie Blake: You can see why people make that false assumption. We highlight the hands on and project based curriculum, and the fact that students are working directly with the industry. It sounds like a tech school or vocational type of university, but in fact couldn't be farther from the truth. Our peers are schools like Rensselaer, MIT, and Carnegie Mellon, all high end computer science schools. The curriculum is computer science theory based, and if you look on our web site

you can really get a sense of the broad based curriculum that you have to have to graduate. Students must take a minimum of 54 General Education Credits for graduation, including Finance and Accounting, Art Appreciation, Photography, Music Appreciation, Literature and more.

Techrockies: Thank you!

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