***Bryan Stevenson Talks about:
The Challenges and Opportunities of Creating the Ideal IT Career Pathway***

By Maureen Majury, M.Ed.

- Who is the ideal Information Technology (IT) student?
- What did they **do** to forge a successful career in IT?
- Can such a student's experiences and education be distilled into relevant recommendations and considerations for future IT students?

Bryan Stevenson (not his real name), a web developer and a former Bellevue College IT student, agreed to an in-person interview and a brief follow-up call, in March 2014. He spoke about:

- how he decided to enroll in Bellevue College's Web Development Certificate program back in 2010,
- what led him to that point in his life, and,
- now that he is a web developer, what were the challenges and rewards of his employment experience over the last four years?

In mapping out ***Building an IT Career-Ready Washington for 2015 and Beyond***, a student's perspective was needed. Since web application software developers are in high demand in the Seattle-Metro area and his ascent into the world of web development, Bryan

was a good choice. He was a graduate of a two-year college IT certificate program and employed in a "hot" IT industry focus area.

While attending Bellevue College, Bryan participated for a quarter on a Microsoft Imagine Cup Team project. (Microsoft's Imagine Cup is a world student technology competition, with the main goal of showing how technology can help solve the world's toughest problems).

By the end of the Bryan's interview, three things became apparent:

1. He was very much in control of his own destiny as an IT professional.
2. Given his story, how could students' exposure to all the great opportunities IT offers them be increased?
3. And how can we reach them at an earlier age to help them figure this out for themselves.

Bryan had a regular high school experience in Burlington, Washington. He thought maybe he would end up as an architect, an engineer or a computer animation specialist. In such a small town, and Burlington is small--made up of strip malls, far and wide farm houses dotting greens, and the ocean--he was an anomaly. A fisherman's son, he knew the family's livelihood depended upon the risk of the boat and the sea.

Bryan took Advanced Placement (AP) chemistry and calculus. He earned A's in his courses. He said high school was a mediocre experience for him because the teachers taught for and to the curve. That means that you take the average student score and craft your lessons to the median denominator. It's a common complaint about secondary education. If the

majority of students are performing below-average, then why are those who want to make the most of their secondary education often unlikely to receive the resources that might be available to them? Why is mediocrity the norm and exceptionalism downplayed?

Bryan moved on and was "excited" when he was accepted at Western Washington University (WWU). While there he became very interested in the Industrial Design program. It accepted 12 students each year; 30 applied each year. Bryan was not accepted. When asked why, he said, "They had stronger portfolios."

WWU also has an Industrial Technology (Tech) program that is the "lesser" program, which actually requires the same pre-requisite courses that those hoping to get into the more prestigious program, Industrial Design, take. Bryan said several of his peers ended up in the Industrial Tech program with him. Sometimes, no matter how much they tell you to shoot for the stars, Bryan's story conveyed, they shoot you down to reality and tell you, "You have what it takes, just not what this program takes".

Bryan, who now is heavily involved in the IT community and industry, was asked if he ever considered a degree or movement towards computer science when his momentum was towards such a specific degree, he said, "No."

Why would someone who had such a solid math background, completed AP courses, got good grades, envisioned himself as an architect, engineer or computer animator, end up settling for a second-tier program?

Where were the college resources to transfer his really solid skill set into an alignment with an IT trajectory? IT needs people like Bryan. So, what was the disconnect?

Upon graduation, Bryan did what many would like to have experienced, but are scared to try. He took a three-month biking trip across Europe on his own. He said, "I visited seven countries." Bryan paid for it with savings and occasionally stayed with European friends he'd made through WWU. His trip was not funded by his parents.

When asked how WWU had prepared him for the job search which all graduates must face Bryan said, "They could have offered more guidance in terms of jobs and salaries; talked about opportunities."

When asked previously if he had ever taken advantage of the services afforded by WWU's career placement center, he said, "No." He told me that ultimately he did. But that was after he spent two years at a major company (hereafter referred to as "Co. Y") specializing in vehicle electronics and manufacturing.

Bryan began his initial job search with a company, hereafter referred to as Co. X, without having developed any professional networking tools (he didn't have a LinkedIn account at that point).   Upon application to Co.X, a major aerospace company, Bryan found once you filled out the requisite online application form, it was lost in the vast ether of a million other applicants' data. If you didn't know someone, you would go nowhere within their network. He never heard from them.

When Bryan ended up at Co.Y, he said he was "excited" he finally had a job. When he said this, it was with the first true excitement he displayed during the 40-minute interview.

After a year, Bryan was laid off. Co.Y was hit hard by the recession. Bryan recalled the original owner's son was hard on the employees. He would collect them and scream at them at company-organized events, berating them for their failure to perform their jobs.

Bryan went to South America for six weeks in June 2009, and then received an email from Co.Y asking him back, but he would be working with a different team. In his new capacity he worked with interior components.

Once back with Co.Y, Bryan wondered about the pay rates of his peers. He found out from Human Resources (HR) they were being paid at a higher rate than he was. They all performed the same duties. He asked for a raise. He had now been at the company for two and a half years. Bryan said, "I was grossly underpaid."

After asking his supervisor multiple times if he would be compensated at the same rate as his peers, he was consistently put off.

Bryan said in a number of different ways, mildly regretful, but at the same time, unapologetic, "I shouldn't have maybe said this. It was taken out of context. But finally I said, 'If you can't increase my salary, I'll have to look elsewhere.'"

It was an ultimatum. At least that's how Co Y's HR department took it. He was called into his supervisor's office and informed he had essentially "resigned" when he made the statement, "If you can't increase my salary, I'll have to look elsewhere."

Bryan wanted to get a chance to tell his co-workers what had happened so they wouldn't think he had resigned, but that actually the HR department and his supervisor had used "...I'll have to look elsewhere" as a loop-hole to fire him.

Thereafter, Co.Y proceeded to fight his claims for unemployment for months, including agreeing to a final Employment Security Department hearing to contest his unemployment claim. Co.Y's representatives didn't attend the hearing. Bryan was granted his unemployment benefits.

Thereafter, Bryan knew **exactly** what he was going to do. This was most likely a result of some research and thought on his end, although he didn't admit as much. Deciding on Bellevue College in 2010, specifically for its web development program, he completed the three-quarter certificate on time. He indicated he wasn't aware initially that he was eligible for worker retraining funding. Bryan applied for the funding for his remaining two quarters and received it. Bryan received straight "A's".

He said that his mastery of object-oriented programming, C#, Javascript, as well as expertise with the .Net Platform, helped him secure employment as a freelancer for a software development contract agency (contract agencies farm out contract projects to independent workers). At that point, Bryan finally set up a LinkedIn account, which he found helpful from a networking perspective. It also was a great place to showcase his achievements. When his first freelance project was done, he then worked for another contract software company. A veteran programmer and web developer mentored him while he was working on that project over the

next year and a half. "He taught me a lot," Bryan said. As well, Bryan was also committed to teaching himself anything he didn't know outside of his contract work.

Bryan's next project wasn't as interesting. In fact he described it as "irritating". So, he quit and helped a friend who had begun an iPhone development startup. He volunteered, living off his savings, so he could learn as much about mobile application development as well as Apple's iPhone operating system (iOS). He said learning the iOS was "100% times harder than learning C#." He lasted five months as his old boss from the contract agency called him back for another contract job at a higher rate.

When asked, "Is it common for people in the IT industry when they first enter it to skip around so much? From your history thus far, it sounds like you moved from job to job."

Bryan said if you want to work for startups, it's common. But if you want to work for the conventional and mature IT company, then rapidly moving from job to job is not typical.

One thing that was attention-worthy was Bryan didn't seem risk-averse. Meaning, most people in their mid- to late-twenties, typically are thinking about finding job stability, creating a presence and a solid reputation with a single employer. Bryan seemed to move from job to job without expressing any of the concerns about where money was going to come from to buy food, housing, gas, etc.

Bryan's rationale was he "got to work on two of the coolest projects" he had ever experienced. One was developing an interface with a time-keeping system. It efficiently tracked and edited projects through a Microsoft Project. The application was developed for

billing services at the contract agency. Essentially, they wanted to track and measure work and time effort to measure efficiencies and look for ways to increase profitability with their contract worker pool.

The other project was an MVC 4 intranet application that would calculate Paid Time Off (PTO). It involved a number of complex business rules.

This contract ended on December 31, 2013, and he was again unemployed. Through LinkedIn, he connected with a company looking for someone with his skills, and he was hired by an online retailer that sells woman's accessories. He's in charge of the website's online "store front." Bryan also works on ensuring the security of the financial purchase transactions.   He works on a team of ten other IT workers.

Towards the end of the interview, Bryan was asked, "What are the top five things from all your experiences that could inform an IT student and/or graduate on how to be successful in the IT world?"

Bryan said thinking about the culture of the organization is useful in determining if a career opportunity at a specific company is right for you. For example, Co.Y had a very traditional, not especially creative, work environment. If he had known initially about the salary and career advancement limitations, as well as the actual duties, he would have made a different choice.   With the career decisions made since leaving Co.Y, Bryan said he created a wider variety of opportunities for himself. From a career development/advancement perspective, Bryan also created a substantive resume' of in-demand IT technical knowledge and

skills. He also carefully curated his online professional profile on LinkedIn to demonstrate how he would make an attractive candidate for a potential IT employer.

When asked earlier how much WWU had offered in terms of solid career counseling, he indicated their services weren't particularly strong. In retrospect, he said he wished they had provided more guidance in terms of information about academic programs, jobs, and salaries. Essentially, WWU could have done a better job in mapping jobs to specific industries.

Bryan specifically listed the five things that an IT prospective student, current student, or graduate entering the employment landscape, should think about aligning to their current mindset about IT.

- Be *passionate* about the projects you work on
- Like *challenges*
- *Perseverance*
- *Collaboration* with others.
- Create a *healthy work/life balance*

He ended by saying that what he really found compelling was you "Won't hit a glass ceiling in IT."

Final Words

Bryan had a chance to read this before its publication. He had these final thoughts to share:

"Some things I didn't know about software/web development when I was a student:

- I didn't know the demand was so much higher than other professional industries (which translates to great pay).
- I didn't know that this was an attainable goal for me.
- I didn't know I would LOVE it so much!

I think that if I had been exposed to coding in high school (or earlier), I would have figured all the above out earlier. I would have pursued the software/web development path as a teen instead of waiting until my late twenties."