

Binghamton

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Word Magic

Bedazzled by kids' literature

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Taking a minority-owned business to the top

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Science pathfinders



Tap your passion

Alumnus helps students explore teaching in Asia. BY BARBARA E. COHEN '75

Sitting in a Big Four accounting firm office poring over clients' financial reports, it slowly dawned on Mitch Gordon '00 that maybe he wasn't a natural-born desk jockey after all. He decided a change was imminent the day he caught himself chanting "head, shoulders, knees and toes" under his breath.

It wasn't that Gordon was literally losing his mind in a Manhattan cubicle. Rather, he found himself continually reliving the time he'd spent after graduation teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) in Taiwan to 5- to 14-year-olds. "There, I started every day with a morning exercise like 'head, shoulders, knees and toes,'" Gordon says. "I missed the sense of being active and engaged with kids."

Gordon began reflecting on what he'd learned at a Binghamton Career Development Center (CDC) program called "Tap Your Passion," which encourages undergraduates to consider career routes that bring their dreams alive. After realizing that he wanted ESL and Asia to be central in his life, it wasn't long before his accounting training gave him a practical way to tap his passion and help others do the same. He founded Reach to Teach Recruiting to connect young professionals eager to teach ESL with employers in Taiwan and mainland China.

PURSUING PASSIONS

Through Reach to Teach, Gordon has helped Binghamton students, recent graduates and others explore the road



Reach to Teach Recruiting, founded by Mitch Gordon '00, has placed dozens of recent graduates, including those from Binghamton, in ESL teaching positions in East Asia.

less traveled. Increasingly, seniors want to take what's been dubbed a "gap year" after getting a degree, before they go on to a more conventional job or graduate school.

Chad Bryant '05, who majored in history at Binghamton, recalls that as a senior, "I had absolutely no idea what to do with my major or the rapidly approaching beast of full-time, monotonous labor." He embraced an experience abroad after learning about ESL opportunities from Gordon at Binghamton's CDC.

"Actually, we prefer not to call it 'taking a year off,'" observes Nancy Paul, CDC director. Paul has seen Binghamton students successfully pursue various gap-year opportunities, from short-term language or cultural-

exchange courses to full-time structured work in a graduate's field of study.

"Now we encourage students to 'take a year on' to explore a meaningful career or gain real-world perspective," Paul says. "Education isn't just about your major."

Gordon is a perfect example. He deferred a job offer from PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP in Manhattan to teach English to Taiwanese students for two years. His goal was to immerse himself in another culture, which eventually opened career possibilities he'd never considered.

His clients typically echo Gordon's sentiments. "I wanted to expand my worldview," explains Reach to Teach client Andrew Wong '05, who majored in finance at Binghamton. Wong

recently returned to the United States after a year teaching English at a private school in southern Taiwan.

TAKING A YEAR ON

A gap year can be a practical way for relatively inexperienced job seekers to gain marketable skills. For example, PricewaterhouseCoopers drew on Gordon's expertise when working with Asian clients.

"I didn't see teaching ESL in Taiwan as turning away from my finance degree," Wong says. "It was an opportunity to enhance my education, especially for future work in international business."

Intrepid students like Gordon used to dive into a gap year without much background information, often with mixed results. To clarify students' options and allay concerns about host countries — including places where English isn't well understood — Binghamton's CDC works with agencies such as Reach to Teach. These agencies can help students "find a trustworthy position and offer support throughout the year," Paul says.

Gordon structured Reach to Teach to reduce typical risks for ESL candidates. His team visits sites to ensure ESL teachers are well situated and language isn't an insuperable barrier. "I only spoke English in my classroom," Wong says. "There was a Mandarin speaker in the classroom with me at all times to ensure instructions were clear to the students."

Gordon's placement officers also untangle visa requirements and arrange sound contract terms (on average,

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MITCH GORDON



teachers end their terms with \$3,000–\$5,000 in savings). He takes time regularly to talk ESL teachers through adjusting to life in Taiwan and in the classroom.

Binghamton students who become ESL teachers through Reach to Teach or other agencies rarely have teaching experience. What they have in spades is "motivation and personality, a sense of adventure and the desire to do something useful," Gordon says, pointing out that new recruits go through a two-week course in teaching ESL before stepping into a classroom.

"The best candidates are open-minded and culturally sensitive," Gordon says, adding that the University is a natural place to find ESL teachers. "Binghamton is a multicultural school that offers exposure to a broad range of cultures," he explains.

GLOBE TROTTER

Since founding Reach to Teach Recruiting a little more than two years ago, Gordon has never looked back.

He has screened more than 2,500 students to select about 250 ESL teachers (29 have been Binghamton students). Most of the ESL teachers have worked on one-year teaching contracts. Half have happily stayed for a second year or more.

Although he lives in Taiwan, Gordon regularly visits schools in the United States, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Canada. He travels periodically to China and Korea, where Reach to Teach also places teachers.

He returns to campus regularly to give presentations organized by the CDC and meet students interested in Asian ESL assignments.

"Binghamton does a great job of encouraging students to consider gap-year options," Gordon says. "Binghamton grads are some of the best teachers we've had."

They get as good as they give, according to Bryant. His time in Taiwan, he says, was "a major life-changing experience." **B**