Our Conversation with Ana Homayoun

Ana Homayoun '01, is the Founder and Director of Green Ivy Education Consulting, based in California. Their "innovative organizational strategies and study techniques help students dramatically improve their academic performance and reduce the stress and anxiety often associated with juggling a rigorous course load and extracurricular activities. In teaching organizational and time-management skills, we help students provide the framework for their own academic and personal success. Most importantly, we help students start to think about pursuing their own personal passions, and empower students to realize their full academic and personal potential."

**Duke I&E: Tell us about your time at Duke. What did you study and what were you involved in? Did you do anything entrepreneurial while you were here?**

**AH:** When I was at Duke, I was a Program II major and was involved in a number of different activities. My Program II was entitled "Health Policy and Globalization" and I took quite a few cultural anthropology, public policy, psychology and sociology classes. I also took classes at UNC-School of Public Health. What I liked most about my major is that I focus on taking classes that I was genuinely interested in. Outside of class, I was in a sorority and was the treasurer of Panhel, but was also a member of the Undergraduate Judicial Board and a Resident Advisor. I came to know a wide cross-section of students and administrators who had different academic and extracurricular interests and perspectives, and I think that is what I liked most about my time at Duke.

I wish Entrepreneurship at Duke had been around when I was there. Though I really didn't do much at Duke specifically in relation to starting my own business, tutoring privately for families and designing my own Program II degree were both pursuits that encouraged me to think and act creatively.

**Duke I&E: You worked at Merrill Lynch after graduating. Obviously a lot of Duke undergrads want to join a company like Merrill Lynch. Tell us about that experience.**

**AH:** I have a great story about how I got the job at Merrill Lynch. In January of my junior year, I needed to get a summer internship. I went to the DukeConnect database, where alumni post their career and contact information, and looked up a woman who was a Duke Alum and worked in the Technology Investment Banking Group in Palo Alto. I didn't know her, but I sent her a nice, thoughtful email with my resume attached. A few weeks later, she called me while she was waiting for a flight in Boston and we had a thirty minute ad-hoc telephone interview. She was apparently impressed by what I had to say, and went to the effort of helping me secure a coveted full time paid internship that summer in the Technology Investment Banking Group. After that summer, I was given a full-time offer. Just shows that the Duke network does work!
I went to work for Merrill Lynch after graduation in June of 2001, and it was a weird time. The technology bubble was bursting, and many of the full-time employees from the summer before had left or been laid off. After 9/11, things became even more bleak. I worked long hours, and spent a lot of time with Excel and Powerpoint (two things that I readily admit are not strengths of mine). I started to think about the other things I wanted to do in my life, and none of them involved Excel, Powerpoint, or working in a cubicle. When I was laid off in November of 2001, I saw that as a chance to start something new. With my severance package, I started tutoring privately, and eventually built what is now Green Ivy Educational Consulting.

**Duke I&E:** You started Green Ivy Education Consulting in 2001. Tell us the story of how it got started.

**AH:** After I was laid off from Merrill Lynch, I reflected on what I enjoyed most and the times when I was happiest. And those times were always tutoring and working with children and teenagers. Within three months, I had more clients than I could handle and was booked solid. Initially, I tutored as a way to "pay my bills" while I figured out my next steps. But pretty soon, I realized how lucky I was - I loved my job and was working with great families, helping kids completely transform their lives and feel good about themselves, and most mornings, I managed to make 9:15 am yoga classes. For me, it was the perfect job.

**Duke I&E:** The company has done well and you have been in business for almost ten years. Tell us what your business is like these days. What do you spend your time on, and who is your typical client?

**AH:** We have been so fortunate to have grown organically, through word-of-mouth and referrals from wonderful parents, educators and psychologists in the area. Our website is www.greenivyed.com.

Today, I spend most of my time giving talks to parent groups and school groups locally and nationally, writing, and working directly with students who are in the midst of the college admissions process. Our typical client is a student who is in junior high or high school, and needs support or help with organization and time management skills, writing skills, school work, standardized testing or college admissions. Much of what we do is to help empower students to hone in on their own personal passions and interests feel good about pursuing all of their opportunities and possibilities.

**Duke I&E:** As you reflect back on the years since you've started, what are some of the things you've learned that you wished you'd known when you were starting. Thinking back to when you were a student, were there things you wished you'd done differently to prepare for being an entrepreneur? And what did you do as a student that you are glad you did?

**AH:** I was a pretty committed student, and for the most part, focused on taking classes I enjoyed. If I could do it over again, I would probably have taken more risks and gotten into more creative endeavors earlier on in my Duke Career - for instance, I took a documentary photography course my senior year and loved it. I wish I had discovered the
Center for Documentary Studies earlier and taken even more risks with my classes and activities.

I think being a Program II major helped prepare me for being an entrepreneur, because in some ways, I had to come up with a plan (my proposal), convince the Deans that it was worthwhile (the pitch), and work hard to make it a reality. For me, Program II was a great way to think outside the box.

**Duke I&E:** You recently wrote a book. Tell us what this book is about. What was it like writing a book? How long did it take, and what was the process like? How has the book impacted your business?

**AH:** My first book, That Crumpled Paper Was Due Last Week, is a parenting book on how to help boys who are struggling with being disorganized or distracted. Duke Magazine did a great piece on it [here](#). Writing the book was a great experience, because I was able to put many of the ideas and experiences I had seen in my work into a book that reached a much wider audience. Now, I get emails from all across the country from parents, educators, and psychologists who have found the book to be incredibly useful in their home or classroom. The book has definitely had a positive impact on my business - more people are aware of us and our work, and I have had many opportunities to speak at schools locally and nationally.

**Duke I&E:** For students that are thinking of starting a company, but thinking about getting investment banking experience first, how would you help them analyze that decision?

**AH:** Personally, I think that every experience can be valuable - however, I would encourage students to ask themselves why they really want that investment banking job first. I definitely don't think that you need to work for an investment bank or consulting firm before you become an entrepreneur - and in most cases, it might delay your efforts more than you think. Truthfully, the only real reason I pursued the job was that someone said it was a really tough job to get and so I thought that if everyone wanted it then it should obviously be good. Looking back, it wasn't the right job for me and I really didn't enjoy the experience. Regardless, I learned important lessons on what I valued in my work and life, and how I wanted to create a work environment based on those values.

**Duke I&E:** A lot of students get stuck on the idea they need to do something incredibly high tech like create the next Google or Facebook. And a lot of them think they need to keep their idea a secret. They might look at a business like yours and say "it's not a technology innovation" and say "if I tell someone my idea, why don't they just steal it and do it themselves?". How do you advise students that are thinking in this way?

**AH:** At Green Ivy, we spend our time focusing on the students and families who we are so fortunate to work with - for us, it is those relationships that have built our company to what it is today. With regards to keeping an idea secret, I think it really depends on what you are doing. The downside to keeping an idea a secret is that you are potentially closing yourself off from people whose insights could really benefit the long-term growth and potential of your idea and company.
**Duke I&E:** Anything else you'd like to share with Duke students?

**AH:** Sometimes, I think that we tend to mistakenly focus solely on those who are building technology companies and/or take venture money when we are talking about entrepreneurship. But there are so many entrepreneurs like myself who built small businesses with very little or no start-up financing, and managed to make it all work by keeping their overhead low, working hard and being creative. In addition, I think that one of the most important questions entrepreneurs should ask themselves before launching a business is "How am I going to make money?" I don't care how big or small your business is, unless you are independently wealthy, you are going to need to figure out how to pay your bills. There are so many businesses that have been created without any real way to generate revenue, and to me that seems confusing and short-sighted.