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Alumni Profile

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Internship launches career



“I have always had encouragement from mentors to follow my dreams.”

– James Taylor '79

When James Taylor '79 reflects on the meaningful work of his life – banking executive, mentor, sports agent, to name some – the common thread always leads back to Linfield College.

Taylor got his start in each of these areas as a Linfield business student, following his interests and doing what “just seemed natural.” His banking career – he is currently vice president of commercial relationships at Umpqua Bank – was launched his junior year when he was selected for an internship with U.S. Bank.

“At that stage in life, most students don’t have formal training in the corporate environment,” said Taylor, who earned a degree in business management. “It was very important to see if I could handle that experience. I fell in love with banking.”

Taylor went on to spend seven years at U.S. Bank before accepting other roles at Wells Fargo, Northwest Bank, Security Pacific Bank (now Bank of America), and finally Umpqua Bank. He has refined skills in international banking, commercial lending, commercial real estate financing and other areas. He served on the Portland Development Commission and worked for the Oregon Economic

Development Department at the state level.

As a Linfield senior, Taylor became a certified agent with the Canadian Football League. When football teammate Leo Sloan '80 wanted to pursue professional football, Taylor negotiated a contract with the Vancouver British Columbia Lions. With encouragement from Professors Dave Hansen and Levi Carlisle, Taylor wrote a letter to Howard Slusher, a prominent sports agent and attorney for Nike, seeking advice.

“He wrote me back with a lot of encouragement,” said Taylor, who still has Slusher’s personal response letter in safekeeping. “It was inspiring. I have always had encouragement from mentors to follow my dreams.”

Taylor added National Football League and National Basketball Association certifications as well, and helped other teammates with professional contracts, including Larry Doty '79, now a Linfield associate professor of health and human performance, who signed with the Edmonton Eskimos football team.

“JT was extremely helpful during that time,” Doty recalled. “When you’re that age and trying to figure out what to do, walking into a room and signing a contract is scary. He is a very genuine person, rarely in a bad mood, and that’s a good combination of characteristics to have.”

Taylor was raised in a military family and lived in Turkey and Spain before settling in Rialto, Calif. His high school counselor and his football coach steered him toward Linfield, where he played tailback on the Wildcat football team, joined

the Black Student Union and served as director of student activities. In addition, he married his high school sweetheart Liz Casson-Taylor the summer before his senior year at Linfield. While at Linfield, he gained confidence in communicating with people from diverse cultures and backgrounds.

“You had people from small town Oregon, big city Portland, different ethnic backgrounds, higher and lower economic backgrounds,” he said. “But we all found ourselves at Linfield. Some people told me I was the first black person they had ever talked with. I never experienced racism on campus and it framed my mind that everyone from the other race isn’t racist. Everyone can or should be able to get along.”

Years later, in the 1990s, he and other Linfield alumni formed the Reachback Program, a mentorship group for Linfield African American students. The alumni, many of whom had been members of the Linfield Black Student Union, took students to cultural events, hosted them in their homes and assisted the students with on-campus assimilation.

“This was one way to give back to the college and help students not feel isolated,” said Taylor. “When I came to Linfield, the older African American students mentored us, knowing we were coming to a predominantly white campus. I had a lot of people who gave me guidance and I learned that was the natural thing to do.”

– Laura Davis