A Career Planning Course for Parents

Your son or daughter just left for (or returned to) college but doesn't seem to have a clue as to what he or she wants to major in, let alone choose as a career. Don't worry, this is not unusual, although you might wish your child had a little more sense of direction.

Choosing a career is a process students need to go through—and they go through the stages of this process at different rates of speed. The steps include:

1. assessing skills, interests, and abilities (an important first step to choosing an appropriate career);
2. exploring majors and career options;
3. experimenting with possible career options; and
4. organizing and conducting a job or graduate school search.

You can assist and support your child in each of these stages. But what can—or should—you do?

Here's your own career planning timetable.

1. Careers 101—for parents of first-year students

During their first year or so of college, students will be involved (formally or informally) in assessing their skills, interests, and abilities. They will do this through finding success (or failure) in courses they take, involvement in campus activities, discussions with their friends and faculty, and by being exposed to and trying out different ideas and experiences.

Most students enter college with a very limited knowledge of the vast array of courses and majors available to them. When they begin to delve into studies that are new to them, even those who entered with a plan may be drawn to different options. This is an exciting time for students.

What you can do to help

- Support your child's exploration of new areas of study and interests. This, after all, is what education is all about.
- Affirm what you know to be areas of skill and ability he or she has consistently demonstrated. Sometimes students overlook these and need to be reminded.
- Talk with your son or daughter about the courses and activities he or she is enjoying. Students discover new things about themselves throughout the college experience. Your willingness to listen and be a sounding board will keep you in the loop.
- Don't panic if your child is excited about majoring in something like English, history, or art. These can be excellent choices, particularly if they are a good match for a student's interests and skills.
- Support your son or daughter's responsible involvement in campus activities but urge this to be balanced with maintaining achievement in the classroom.
- Urge your child to seek assistance in the campus career center. Most institutions have assessment instruments and counselors to help students to define their skills, interests, and abilities.

2. Careers 201—For parents of second-year students

Generally, during the second year of college, a student begins to explore majors and career options more seriously. Many colleges and universities require that new students take a broad range of subjects to promote this exploration.

What you can do to help

- Don't insist upon a decision about a major or possible career choice immediately. If you sense that your child's indecision is a barrier to positive progress, urge that he or she look for assistance in the career center. Students often have difficulty making a "final" choice because they fear they may close off options and make a wrong choice.
- Suggest that your son or daughter talk with faculty and career advisers about potential choices.
- Direct your child to family, friends, or colleagues who are in fields in which he or she has an interest. "Informational interviewing" with people can be extremely helpful at this stage.
- Steer your child toward a source of information. Many campuses have a career consultant or mentoring network of alumni in various career fields who are willing to share information with students about their careers. These resources are invaluable both in this exploratory stage and later as students are seeking internships and jobs.

3. Careers 301—For parents of "mid-career" students

During the sophomore year and throughout the junior year, it is important for students to experiment with possible career options. They can do this in a variety of ways: internships, cooperative education programs, summer jobs, campus jobs, and responsible volunteer experiences both on campus and in the local community. This is a critical time for your support and understanding.

What you can do to help

- Encourage your child to use the resources available at the campus career center. Experts there can assist your child in preparing a good resume and finding opportunities to test career choices. Most career centers are in direct contact with employers.
- Tell your child that you understand the importance of gaining exposure to and experience in his or her field of career interest. Broadening experience through involvement outside the classroom is a valuable use of time.
- Internships or summer experiences may be non-paying. Also, a good opportunity may be in a distant location. Discuss your financial expectations with your child before a commitment is made.
- Don't conduct the internship or summer job search for your child. It's a great help to provide networking contacts or names of people who may be helpful; however, making the contact and speaking for your child deprives him or her of an important learning experience—and may make a poor impression on the future employer.

4. Careers 401—For parents of graduating seniors

The senior year is when organizing and conducting a job search or graduate school search begins in earnest. It is also a time when students are heavily involved in more advanced courses and often have more responsible roles in campus and/or volunteer activities. Balancing these important pursuits and setting priorities is a constant challenge for seniors.

You are probably anxious for this young adult to make a decision—and yet, he or she may be moving toward closure more slowly than you would wish.

What you can do to help

- Suggest that he or she use the campus career center throughout the senior year. These offices provide assistance in preparation for the job search. Offerings may include:
    - Workshops and individual help with resume and cover letter writing, interviewing, and other job-search skills,
    - Individual and group career advising,
    - Job-search resources,
    - On-campus interviewing opportunities, and,
    - Alumni career consultant or mentor programs.
- Don't nag your child about not having a job yet. This will often have the reverse effect. Use positive reinforcement.
- Offer to assist by sending information you may have found about your child's target career field and/or job listings that may be of interest. Listen for indications from your child that you are getting carried away—and back off.
- Don't call potential employers to intervene for your child. Contact with potential employers is the candidate's responsibility.
- Be prepared to support your child through the ups and downs of the job and graduate school search. It can be a bumpy road—not every desired job or graduate school acceptance will come through. Your student will need reassurance that for every door that closes, another opens.

5. Final Thoughts

The college years are a time of exploration, experimentation, and learning on many levels for students and their parents! Some student challenges may seem more positive than others, but all contribute to the educational outcomes of the college or university experience.

Throughout these years, students are developing a "record of achievement" that will be evaluated by employers and graduate schools as they move beyond college. There are several pieces of this record:

- **Academic achievement.** The grade point average (GPA) is one factor considered by competitive employers and graduate schools. It is one of the few tangible indications of a student's ability to learn and perform effectively, at least in the academic environment. Therefore, students need to do as well as possible in the classroom, especially in courses in their majors.
- **Responsible work experience.** In today's competitive employment market, many employers seek students who have related internship, summer, cooperative education, or part-time job or volunteer experiences. In fact, employers often look to their own such

programs as primary sources for their new hires. These experiences are particularly critical for liberal arts students whose majors may not appear to be directly related to their areas of career interest.

- **Responsible involvement outside the classroom.** Extracurricular activities provide the opportunity for students to gain many valuable and career-related skills, such as the ability to work effectively with others in a team environment; leadership; planning and organizational skills; and priority-setting and time management. These are part of the package of skills employers seek in their new hires.

Best of luck to you in navigating the challenging waters of parenting a college or university student.

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