

A Career Action Plan

Question: *Have you figured out yet what you want to be when you graduate?*

Answer: *Graduate? I just got here! I have plenty of time—years—to think about a career and what I'm going to do in the future.*

Maybe you don't even know which classes to take next semester, but today's a good day to start thinking about what you might like to be when you finish school.

It's important, career counselors say, to start thinking about your career as early as possible. That doesn't mean you have to know exactly what you want to be after college—or that you can't change your mind along the way. Your freshman year isn't too early to start mapping out your future—even if you haven't chosen a major yet. Career counselors recommend students take a few preliminary steps in the career exploration process during their first few months in college.

But don't worry if you are long past your first year in school. Counselors say early is best, but it's never too late. Your first step, though, is to introduce yourself to a counselor at the career center.

"Start wherever you are in the process," says Terri Gelles, director of the career center at Mount Saint Mary's College in Emmitsburg, Maryland. "And go from there. It's easier to structure the process year by year, but it's never too late."

"If you begin the process early, you have a relaxed, less anxiety-producing process than if you begin later. The information career counselors offer is an outline" of steps that will make your first job search—and job searches your whole life—more organized and thorough.

The early start method has clear advantages. "Career planning" is a bit like studying for a final exam. If you go to

class, read the text, and do a few of the assignments along the way, you won't have to stay up all night at the last minute cramming for the final exam. In this case, if you start early in your college years, go to a few workshops, follow some simple advice, and complete a few assignments, you won't be scrambling for help two weeks before graduation.

Many colleges and universities require freshmen to complete an orientation program. At some time during that hour-long, day-long, week-long, or semester-long program, someone may talk about the career center and how it can help you meet your goals. Or, a career counselor may show up in one of your classes to talk about what the career center can do for you. While your first contact may be through the orientation or in class presentation, it's up to you to stay in touch with the career center and use its resources. And, if your school doesn't include career center staff in orientation or class presentations, it's very important that you take the first step and go to the center to check it out.

At the career center, you will probably find a "career timeline" or "career action plan" for working through the career planning process. These describe activities you need to do each year in college that will give you the skills you need to land a job at graduation. The steps in each college's timeline are pretty much the same. They are:

- Discovery;
- Exploration;
- Experience and Experiment; and
- Choice

In the *Discovery* phase, you take easy tests (there are *no* wrong answers) to explore your interests, values, and skills and how they may relate to various jobs. The results will help you pinpoint careers that might suit you. Career counselors will encourage you to join Campus clubs, talk to faculty and professionals in fields you

think you may be interested in, and participate in volunteer community service activities. Often career counselors can also help you find a part-time or summer job that relates to your major or career goals. If you haven't chosen a major, you can do it now or in the next phase.

The Exploration phase narrows your career exploration path just a little. After you've chosen a major, you will need to ensure your academics support your goals. Career counselors can help you contact people in jobs that interest you so that you can find out more about those jobs. You should also attend short workshops and seminars that teach you preliminary job-search skills—resume writing, for example—to help you find a part-time or summer job to test your chosen career field.

The Experience and Experiment stage gives you a chance to decide if the career you've chosen is right for you or if you should look at other careers. (You can change your mind at any time, of course.) This is the time to consider graduate school or professional school and take the required tests for admission. If the work world is your goal, career counselors will direct you to job fairs and to internships in your field. You should also participate in more job-search workshops to hone your resume writing skills and help you compose a cover letter to an employer. And, plug into your school's alumni network for firsthand information on employers and the work environment.

In the final phase—the Choice Phase—get your resume critiqued and proofread in preparation for real interviews with real employers for real jobs. Research potential employers and sign up for on-campus interviews with those you choose. Go to job fairs. Network with professionals—especially alumni who might be supporting your job-search efforts—in the field you have chosen. Then, pursue your first job.

The career planning process really can take four years. However, if you've come in a little late, counselors say a modified version of the timeline can help a student find a job in six months. If you are late, be prepared for a more intense and time consuming process.

"I sit down with [late students] and ask them to tell me what they've done as a student," Gelles says. "What activities have they participated in? Why did they choose their major? What have they done during the summer? A lot of things students naturally engage in on campus have implications for the career process, yet students don't know that.

"My message to all students is, look at the skills you have developed through your experiences," she says. "Many skills are not really taught, but are developed. Interpersonal skills and communication skills, for instance, are developed through interaction with other students during group activities, sports, clubs, and organizations."

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