

Helping Your Student Make Informed Career Decisions

By Robert Orndorff

Robert Frost (1874 - 1963) wrote, "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I — I chose the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference." Unfortunately, when choosing a career, most college students aren't exposed to "the road less traveled" and are forced to choose the only one they know. Naturally, people make decisions based on options that have become *familiar* to them.

Similarly, most college students choose a career field based on a handful of options that have become *familiar* to them. When asked why they chose their major, the answers that most students give sound something like this: "*I chose accounting because my father is an accountant, and it seemed pretty neat.*" Or, "*Everyone is getting into technology these days. That's the way to go.*" There's nothing wrong with your son or daughter following in your footsteps or the status quo. However, there are more than 20,000 existing occupations, making it very likely that there's an unknown career out there about which your student could become even more passionate.

Start Early

Parents can play a significant role in helping their students make informed decisions about their future. This begins with encouraging your student to begin early in seeking out ways to explore careers.

In a recent survey, more than 80% of 220,000 incoming college freshmen rated finding a better job as a very important reason for attending college. In the same survey, only 4% planned on seeking career guidance. Ironically, most college students attend college to prepare for a career, yet very few actually take time to explore career options. Freshmen and sophomores particularly do not have a sense of urgency to explore careers; they generally perceive career exploration a "senior thing." Also, very few (if any) *Exploring Career Fields 101* courses exist in a college curriculum. Thus, don't assume that your son or daughter will automatically become exposed to careers during college. It's up to the student to initiate ways to explore careers.

College Career Centers and Mentoring Programs

The best first step is for your student to visit the college career center. Most career centers have a wide variety of career exploration resources, from career assessments to work-shadowing alumni in fields of interest.

Many colleges have career-mentoring programs where alumni, parents, and their friends volunteer to serve as career mentors or advisors. This offers the opportunity for both the student and parent to get involved together. Students can contact these volunteers to learn more about their career field and to

network. Your involvement would send a positive message to your student regarding the importance of career exploration, plus strengthen the overall career-mentoring program in which your student participates.

If your student's college or university currently doesn't have a career mentoring program, one can be started with you and your business contacts. In the interim, you may wish to identify your own business contacts in a range of interests with whom your student can schedule brief exploratory meetings.

Internships/Volunteering

For college students, there is no better way to "test-drive" careers of interest than to experience them first hand through an internship or volunteering. Internships serve as the deepest level of career exploration, where your son or daughter samples or experiences careers of interest for a substantial period of time. An internship or volunteering also provide the college student with that much needed business experience that supplements in-class learning.

In addition, internships and volunteering serve as THE networking vehicles for college students and may lead to a job upon graduation. Networking continues to be the best job search method with an estimated 70-80 percent of all jobs acquired through some form of networking. Students who spend a few months with a company naturally build numerous relationships with supervisors and co-workers who later turn into invaluable networking contacts. In addition, there is a growing movement among employers to utilize internship programs as a recruitment tool and to identify qualified candidates for entry level positions!

Internships come in all shapes and sizes. Some internships are paid; some are voluntary. Some internships receive academic credit and are coordinated through your son or daughter's college, while others don't receive credit and are independent of the curriculum. The length and duration of internships vary as well. The important thing is that the internship is coordinated in conjunction with your student's long-range academic plan. Your son or daughter should talk with their academic advisor to determine the most appropriate type of internship. The career center can help identify prospective internship sites and opportunities to volunteer. You can also use your own contacts to help your son or daughter expand the list of prospects.

Be Supportive

I've counseled numerous college students who expressed a lack of support from their parents regarding the career decision-making process. There are two main issues that are most prevalent. First, many parents give their son or daughter a hard time for being indecisive about their career direction. Some students will haphazardly choose a major or career just to get their parents off their back. It's important to realize that there is a readiness factor and that each student is different. For those students in career-track majors (accounting, engineering, teaching, etc.), the career choice is more straightforward. However, for many liberal arts majors (philosophy, history, etc.), the options are much more diverse. Second, many parents impose their values and beliefs onto their son's or daughter's career field of interest. It's not rare to hear a student say something to the effect of, "I want to major in History, but if I do, my parents won't pay for my education. They want me to major in something more practical, like business." Remember that an unmotivated business graduate with a low GPA won't be as marketable as a history major graduating with honors. Thus, parents should encourage their sons and daughters to explore majors and careers in which *they* are interested and to make a decision when *they* are ready to do so.

A Final Note

As you well know, a career is a very important part of one's life. There are too many people in the working world who live for after five o'clock and weekends. Likewise, we see too many students floundering through college without a real sense of purpose or direction. The cost of higher education is too high to watch your child go through the motions for four years! Encourage your son or daughter to become active in exploring careers before and during college, and offer unconditional support as he or she grapples over one of life's major decisions.

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