

ACADEMIC PLANNING AS A CAREER STRATEGY

The following ideas were adapted from a handout given by the Division of Undergraduate Studies at Penn State to its students, who more often than not have great concerns about their University education vis-a-vis the job market. Addressing students directly, it is intended as a practical tool for academic advisors at all institutions of higher education regardless of size or scope. Those who find the contents helpful for their advisees should feel free to use this feature, partially or in its entirety, and should feel free to structure it for local situations.

If you are concerned about employment opportunities after graduation, then perhaps the following eleven hints may be of some use for planning your academic and future career.

1. *Choose a Major That Satisfies You.*

If you want to study elementary education or history or astronomy or aerospace engineering, then do just that. Do not permit glib generalizations that graduates in certain majors face a tough job market to sway your decision totally. Job opportunities are an important consideration, but not the underlying reason for a college education. Success in any major demands both interest and abilities in that area. If you choose a major strictly for its job possibilities and do not take into account your academic background and personal interests, then you could be headed for trouble. Get all the facts (course requirements, etc.) and make a careful assessment of yourself in relationship to that particular major.

2. *Think Practically and Creatively.*

Obsession with your future can only lead to needless anxiety, but mature concern cannot hurt you. Immediately upon finding a major that suits your interests and abilities, begin to make its requirements and its flexibility work for you. Take a good look at your major—especially if it's in a so-called non-professional area, e.g., English, Art History, Biology—and see whether you can use statistics, computer science, business, or technically related courses as requirements, as a minor, or as electives.

3. *Strengthen Your Communication Skills.*

The success of your job interviews and applications and your subsequent success in a career will depend heavily upon how well you communicate. Incorporate as many speaking and writing courses and experiences into your major as you possibly can.

4. *Be Aware of Advanced Training Requirements.*

Some professions and jobs demand advanced schooling or training beyond your college degree. Check into these requirements and make plans for these experiences as early as possible.

5. *Earn the Best Grades Possible.*

Believe it or not, dedication, enthusiasm, and the ability for self-discipline do impress prospective employers and admissions officers of graduate and professional schools. Good grades can be a reflection of these positive qualities.

6. *Exhaust Every Informational Resource at Your Disposal.*

- a. **Departmental** or Faculty Academic Advisors: Most departments are concerned about their students' futures, so ask your faculty or departmental advisor for literature and helpful hint about future possibilities in your area of study.
- b. The Library: Any good student should know that any and all information can ultimately be found in a large library. Most libraries have a section devoted to academic and career information. Ask a Librarian for assistance.
- c. Advising Centers: At campuses with centralized advising centers you undoubtedly will find literature on majors; catalogues on graduate, technical, and professional schools; plus information on many types of occupations. Academic advisors at these centers most certainly will help you with questions pertaining to the best major suited to you and how that major can apply to various careers.
- d. Campus Career Centers: Every college has some type of career center with a library and professional staff dedicated to assisting students with career concerns. At the very least, you should visit your campus career center and become familiar with its resources and how they can help you.
- e. Career Sessions: Many colleges, campuses, and academic departments have days or evenings devoted to the topic of occupations and careers. Keep on the lookout for these sessions related to your area of study.

7. *Get Practical Experience.*

A job candidate's previous record does count with employers. You should realize that most programs give students the opportunity to earn credit for a working experience if students are willing to invest the time and personal initiative. Ask your advisor about an "internship" or a "practicum" as part of your academic program. Use your free time wisely by obtaining employment or extracurricular experience related directly or indirectly to your area of interest. These practical experiences will test your motivation and continued interest.

8. *Talk with People in the Field.*

Ask them exactly what their job entails and how and why they were hired for those positions, and what they studied in college. You may be surprised by their answers. Also ask them for suggestions regarding courses and academic programs you might follow.

9. *Research Career Literature.*

You do a lot of research for your courses, so do some research for yourself. You will be pleasantly surprised to discover the large variety of careers that exist and how you can fit into many of them regardless of your major. An absolute must for the beginner and for those who do not know where to begin is the *Occupational Outlook Handbook*. Published by the U. S. Department of Labor, this book provides pages of detailed explanations regarding every conceivable position from accountant to zoologist. The book also includes addresses for further information once you have identified some specific areas. You can find this book in any library and in most career centers.

10. *Be Persistent.*

If a job is your immediate goal, do not despair or panic' if you cannot find one the day after you graduate. Anyone can experience some difficulties in acquiring a satisfying position. You must keep trying. You must make employers aware that you are interested in them. You must help employers realize that they should be interested in you.

11. *Remember Hint #1.*

Make sure that you major in an area that suits your academic and personal abilities and interests. You will do no one any good, especially yourself, if you are unhappy in your work or if you flunk out of school.