Exploring Career Options

Getting Started

Students at all stages of their collegiate careers can benefit from career exploration; you can benefit even if you feel you're certain of your major or career path. Core elements of career exploration include examining and reflecting on yourself, understanding the world of work, and taking advantage of opportunities for gaining experience both on and off campus. This handout includes a few ideas to help you be actively engaged in your career exploration at every stage of your professional and personal development. To begin:

- Make an appointment with a CLS adviser
- Take a self-assessment (e.g., FOCUS2, StrengthsFinder, MBTI) at the CLS
- Talk to your academic adviser or other faculty members about your interests
- Conduct informational interviews with alumni who are working in your areas of interest (see below)

Moving Forward with the Career-Exploration Process

Engage in On-Campus Leadership

Through leadership in student and community organizations, you can practice and gain many skills that will develop your professional abilities—and that employees will love. You don't have to hold a title (e.g., "president") to be a leader. Note that you can build an impressive skill set through involvement in any organization—regardless of whether it is directly related to your future ambitions. Engage deeply with a select few organizations about which you are most passionate: chair a committee, organize an event, or take charge of annual responsibilities (e.g., recruitment, marketing, budgeting).

Continue to Engage in Leadership during Semester Breaks

If you plan to return to a previous summer job, make sure you don't just do the same things you've done before. Instead, talk with your supervisor about taking on more of a leadership role. Are there things you can do in the context of that business or organization that would allow you to demonstrate more responsibility? For example, if you were a lifeguard at a pool, does the pool need a "head lifeguard" who is in charge of scheduling the other staff, making sure people show up for their shifts, and the like? If you worked as a restaurant server, can you take a lead with she shift on a certain night, help with the books, organize a special event for all the staff, or take on another project that demonstrates a progressive level of engagement and responsibility? The older you get—and the more experienced you become—the more you have to offer any employer or organization. Take advantage of your skills and experience, building on them with every opportunity you have.

Volunteer

Do you have a passion to better your community? Do you have time during the school year or semester breaks to do so? Even students who have to work a substantial number of hours during the semester or during breaks still find time to volunteer. Prioritize your time so you can do something extra that simultaneously allows you to give back to the community and provides you with experience and information about a career field of interest.

Shadow an Alumnus in a Field of Interest to You

You'll find Grinnell alumni all across the United States—and all across the world. Create a profile at LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com), and join the "Grinnell College Alumni" group. Then find an alumnus in the career field you want to pursue and ask if you can shadow him or her for a day at work. You'll learn *a lot* in a very short period of time. Ask this alumnus for names of colleagues who do similar things, and try to shadow one of them, as well. (In other words, network through others' networks.) Two people, even those with the same degrees and job titles, may do very different kinds of things, depending on their work demands and their own personal styles. Triangulating data is therefore important: Don't let a singular experience (or what one person says to you) determine whether you continue investigating a potential career pathway.

Conduct Informational Interviews with Alumni

If you're not able to shadow any of the alumni you've identified via LinkedIn, ask if you could chat on the phone for 30 minutes for an informational interview. Even if they aren't involved in the exact career field that interests you, they can talk with you about the work they do, talk about how they got there, and relate it to their Grinnell experience. Their wisdom may shape the kinds of courses you end up taking, determine how you spend your next break, or simply reassure you that a liberal arts degree will in fact translate to the workforce.

How to Conduct Informational Interviews with Alumni

1. Use LinkedIn to find alumni of interest
2. Consult the Grinnell College Forum (alumni directory) to find a way to contact them
3. Use the "Contact" tab within the Forum to send each alumnus an individual message, briefly introducing yourself (your class year, major, and hometown) and requesting 30 minutes to interview them about their fields, their positions, and any suggestions they may have for a young professional
4. Research the companies where the alumni work
5. Remember the purpose of each interview: to hear the alumni's stories and gather advice and suggestions as you move forward in your education and career search
6. Conduct the interview, being professional and polite (for example, don't use the alumni's first names until you are invited to do so—instead, use "Mr. Brown" or "Ms. Jones"; make sure to contain your initial conversation to the agreed-upon 30 minutes)
7. Send a thank-you note (via e-mail is fine, since you might not have an up-to-date mailing address) within 24 hours after your conversation

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Update Your Résumé

You enter college with a wealth of experiences—but you garner more and more while in college. In order to assess the skills and interests you already have, stop by the CLS to create or update your résumé. Doing so will help you understand patterns in your experiences and interests that may better direct you toward that next step.

Center for Careers, Life, and Service
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