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:

- <u>Discovery;</u>
- <u>Exploration;</u>
- Experience and Experiment; and
- <u>Choice</u>
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