

HOW TO GET ANY JOB

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Berkeley

(OR HOW TO AVOID LIVING IN YOUR PARENTS' BASEMENT)

LIFE
LAUNCH &
RELAUNCH
FOR
EVERYONE
UNDER 30

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Life Planning versus Getting a Job

Most college students want a job when what they should really want is a little life planning. What is life planning? Life planning is conducting a process of self-discovery and then matching what is discovered with the career marketplace.

Life planning is different from getting a job. Getting a job is a process of finding paid employment, whether or not there is any match whatsoever between the employee's skills, preparation, interests, or long-term goals, plus whatever is involved in performing on the job. Getting a job is a good end product to life planning, but is not an end in itself. It is, to put it simply, not the point. The point is the self-discovery and the matching.

College students have no special claim on this. A thirty-year-old, single working mother has the same opportunity to choose to get another job or choose to go through a bit of life planning. So has a fifty-year-old college professor considering leaving his tenured position. So has a sales executive with a Fortune 500 company. But college students have a unique opportunity to do this right. You have the opportunity to do this right at a juncture that can lead to a lifetime of increased happiness.

Some of the mid-career executives I work with in my career coaching practice are miserable. I am struck by what a high price poor early career decisions can have. Employment is a huge part of adult life. Between the end of college and the onset of retirement, a career takes up about 100,000 hours of our lives. That's a lot of time to be miserable. And that's not counting commuting. You will not spend that much time with your kids, should you choose to have them, or with a spouse, should you choose to have one. A job doesn't have to be the most meaningful thing in your life. Perhaps your

family or your religion or your volunteer or community work will be more important to you, but nothing is likely to be bigger in terms of sheer volume of time. It is a tragedy, of Shakespearean proportion, to be miserable on the job.

On the other hand, if you find jobs you love, you'll never work a day in your life. You'll notice I wrote "jobs" in the plural. You will need to find many jobs after college.

Your Future as a Worker

According to conventional wisdom, you will need to find more than nine jobs between college and retirement. I think this is inaccurate. In fact, I believe the generation leaving college now is going to need to find some twenty to thirty jobs before retirement. The old projections were exactly that—projections of the future based on the past—assuming the future is like the past. But the future of this generation of students is different than the future of prior generations. The covenant between employers and employees has been broken. Back in the day, a white-collar worker had a job until she retired. In actual fact, that often didn't happen. But it was the operative theory. This is no longer the operative theory. A company's covenant now with its employees goes something like this: "If our needs mutually converge, great! If they don't, see ya!"

This fact changes the way *all* workers should approach their work life. You have to be ready *all the time* to find a new job.

Let me be clear about what I'm telling you: **You will be fired through no fault of your own during your work life.** You will go to work one day and find that you or your department or your office or even your entire company is no longer in business, and suddenly you need a new job. You may see it coming or you may not, but you can't say you weren't warned.

Not only will you need to find many jobs over your working lifetime, you will also pass through periods of self-employment and portfolio employment. Self-employment includes, obviously, those times when a careerist launches an entrepreneurial endeavor. But it also includes millions of workers who

cannot find a job and are forced to let their services out on a contract basis, catching an assignment here, a project there, to get through a tight spot in a specific industry or local economy.

Portfolio employment is both old and new. The idea of portfolio employment goes back to the days of craftsmen's guilds, when a worker had a skill that was so valued he could set the terms of engagement with an employer or a series of simultaneous employers. The worker was like a little factory, free to trade with many buyers. Now it means someone who has several revenue streams instead of a job. The worker becomes like a little company, with more than one customer and perhaps more than one product line. There'll be more discussion of this later in the book.

Job change may come up some twenty or thirty times for you, but other major career shifts are also on your horizon. It's one thing to find another job that you like better than the last, but it's another thing entirely to find a new career that you like better than the last. I haven't been able to find any usable research on this topic, but it seems to me that most people have at least two distinct careers, and some have five or more.

The problem with this topic is it is very hard to define a career. Does a nurse who goes to medical school and becomes a doctor have a new career, or is he just continuing with his career in health care? Does a real estate agent who becomes a developer have a new career, or is she just continuing with her interest in providing housing for families? It can be argued either way.

My observation of real people with real work lives is that most people have major shifts somewhere in their futures. I know a college professor who turned his hobby into a multimillion-dollar business. I know a soldier who became an engineer who became a real estate magnate. I know a warehouse worker who went back to college and became a high school principal. And so on.

Big Changes Are in Your Future

And you can make mistakes in your work life. In fact, feel free to make mistakes. One of things I love most about this country is that it is the land of

second chances. You can fix a bad work situation anytime. In America you are not sentenced to pursue the choices that your mother or father pursued. Your family name or tribe or clan or caste does not determine your career. Your major in college does not determine what you get to do for the rest of your life. If your job or your field is no longer attractive to you, you can go in a new direction. You are in charge.

What does this have to do with life planning and getting a job? Every single time you change jobs, you have a choice: to go get another job or to do real life planning. In fact, you have a much greater chance to be happy with your work life today than in prior generations, because you have a far greater number of opportunities to change your employment situation. Every transition is an opportunity to seek employment more meaningful, more fun, more rewarding, and more to your liking.

Change Is Good

One thing should be clear: It is not acceptable to fail to learn how to do life planning. It's not something that you do once, right out of college, and then don't worry about again. It's truly a life skill, something that you need to know how to do in order to succeed in your life. Don't skip this class.

Your first task is to unlearn what you know about the relationship between college and work.

The Relationship between College and Work

This is a book about getting jobs out of college, not about choosing a major. If you want to know more about choosing a major, see *College Majors Handbook* by Neeta Fogg, Paul Harrington, and Tom Harrington, which is an outstanding study of majors and career outcomes, and *The Undecided College Student* by Virginia Gordon, which is written for advisors. Choosing a major is a big deal, but I am going to assume you've already chosen it and the only issue now is launching a successful life after college. Let's think about the link between major and employment and long-term life success.

How did you pick your major? Because you loved the subject, or because

you thought it would help you get a job after college, or to please your parents, or some combination of the above?

We often go to college for the wrong reasons, and then compound the error when we try to launch a life afterward. To put it plainly, those who go to school *primarily* in order to get a job are often poorly served by doing so. They are ill-served during the college experience itself *and* ill-prepared for the employment marketplace afterward. Don't worry if you are starting to worry if this is you; it can be fixed. But let's review how this can happen.

Students may choose a major in order to have the career that they believe goes with that major. For example, they decide to become a chemical engineering major because they heard somewhere that chemical engineering majors are the highest paid upon graduation from college or university. Or they take premed classes because they think it will increase their chances of getting into medical school. Or they take engineering because their parents want them to become engineers and, their parents believe, there are always plenty of high-paying jobs for engineers. Or they pursue accounting or nursing because they think they want to be accountants or nurses.

In short, they are choosing majors because of the career outcomes of those majors, not because of any inherent desire to learn those subjects.

The problem is that these decisions are made at age eighteen or nineteen, often without any career advice at all or with advice of the very worst sort. For illustration purposes, let's examine some of the hidden biases in the above choices. For example, it is true that chemical engineering consistently draws top salary offers, but that would be irrelevant if you didn't like chemical engineering or couldn't succeed at it. It is not true that choosing a premed major makes you more likely to get into medical school; as long as you do well in the prerequisite courses, you can major in anything. It is not true that there are always plenty of jobs for engineers, either. It is true that majoring in nursing or accounting prepares you for careers in nursing or accounting, but it is equally true that majoring in nursing or accounting can lead to many other careers.

Question: What do these five college graduates have in common?

Bank officer

Stock market analyst

Music therapist

Director of a senior citizens' center

Field archaeologist

Answer: They were all French majors at the same college.¹

Can philosophy and English majors survive on Wall Street? Of course! According to two major studies on the topic, liberal arts majors get promoted faster and tend to rise higher on the organizational charts than engineering and business majors hired at the same organization at the same time.²

This is not to say that your major has no impact on your earnings; it does, but other studies show that hours worked, gender, attainment of advanced degrees, being taller than average in high school, if male, and being more attractive than average—but not drop-dead gorgeous—are influences on earnings. But no one is suggesting that you change your gender or become taller in high school if that is not your nature.

All types of companies hire all types of majors. Even in high-tech companies, one quarter of the people employed do not have technical degrees. (If you want to know more about this, read William A. Schaffer's *High-Tech Careers for Low-Tech People*.) And as it turns out, music is not an uncommon major among computer programmers. Einstein studied music passionately, in addition to physics. Writing well, which is something one learns to do in an English lit program, is in such demand in all types of organizations that it is considered a key to management advancement. According to research monitored by Dr. Howard Figler, a consultant to university career centers, between 40 and 60 percent of all CEOs majored in the liberal arts as undergraduates. They would presumably have majored in such things as philosophy, music, and English literature before going on to become scions of business. These data may be influenced by issues related to class as well as choice of major, yet the inference can be made that future CEOs can start with any major.

I am appalled, even horrified, that you have adopted Classics as a major. As a matter of fact, I almost puked on the way home today. I am a practical man, and for the life

of me I cannot possibly understand why you should wish to speak Greek.

—From a letter from Ed Turner to his son, Ted.³

There is an old saying in career counseling: Your major may help you get a job in the first place, but it is your education that helps you get promoted. I will go further and say that an undergraduate curriculum can best provide an education, while graduate school can best provide specialization. Continuing your education past the baccalaureate level is actually a much bigger influence on earnings than your choice of an undergraduate major. More than half the workers in America have been to college,⁴ so it's just not that powerful a ticket, all by itself. Of course, if you are only interested in money, skip college and become a longshoreman. They earn an average of \$107,000 per year in West Coast ports, and a foreman can bring in \$167,000.⁵

Although it is true that all art majors earn less than all engineering majors, it is not true that you as an art major would learn less than you as an engineering major. Here's a truism for you: Individuation will always exceed group norms. One of the most successful business people I know was an art major, and his company sells products you can buy in any hardware store in the country.

Further, when students pick majors based on career outcomes, they sometimes pick majors they don't really enjoy. Sometimes this is true *even if they would have enjoyed the career associated with the major*. As just one example, a lot of premed majors would make excellent doctors, but get turned off by years of laboratory sciences that have little relevance to the curriculum or clinical training provided in medical school. Or they blow their GPAs studying subjects that aren't really required for success in medical school, and then can't get in because of a tarnished record.

However, this is not an invitation to change your major if you're on track to graduate. If you're looking down that short tunnel to commencement, don't endanger that. *Get the job done and graduate on time*. But more importantly, *don't compound a poor choice of major with a poor choice of career direction*.

Here is the biggest secret in life planning: **You can get any job with any major.**

I don't mean that all majors prepare you for all jobs equally well, but I do mean that at the juncture of college graduation, no job is inherently sealed off to you simply and solely because of your major.

For example, I don't mean to imply that it is easy to get a job in accounting if you've never taken a class in accounting, but it is not at all out of the question. It is entirely possible if you want it. I knew a college student who was a marketing major, who got a temp job with an accounting firm the summer before graduation. He helped out with some accounting and found out he liked it. He didn't change his major, but he did stay in contact with the firm during his senior year. Upon graduation they hired him, and after a few night classes, he's an accountant today.

Let me be doubly clear in my purpose of discussing the relationship between majors and possible job choices: I don't want you to abandon your major or doubt the wisdom of your choice. *I want you to abandon the limitations you have put on yourself.*

You cannot do real life planning while you are accepting a preordained conclusion. Most people receive tons of career advice and influence from family, friends, neighbors, faculty, and the media that simply don't hold up under scrutiny. Chance, inclination, and extra hard work are far more important in the long run than your major—or even your GPA or whether you were a tall male in high school.

Let's consider what employers themselves say they want in their new hires. According to a survey of corporate recruiters by the National Association of Colleges and Employers, here are the top characteristics of new hires in order of importance:

- Communication skills
- Strong work ethic
- Teamwork skills
- Initiative
- Interpersonal skills

- Problem-solving skills
- Analytical skills
- Flexibility/adaptability
- Computer skills
- Technical skills
- Detail-oriented
- Organizational skills

You'll notice that any student with any major could easily possess all of these attributes. We'll address what kind of computer skills employers want in a later section, but suffice it to say that the typical college student possesses most of them.

Some majors are obviously preparatory for a particular type of career, for example, elementary education. You can predict that a student pursuing this major plans to start her career as an elementary school teacher. In practice, however, careers change and evolve from the initial post-college job in ways that are simply not that predictable, even for those students who have a clear starting point.

By investigating real people and actual employment patterns, you will see how this works:

- Comedian Stephen Colbert was a philosophy major.
- Young MC, music mogul, was an economics major.
- Chad Hurley, founder of YouTube, was an art major.
- Basketball star Michael Jordan was a geography major.
- Alan Greenspan, former chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, started out as a music major.
- Comedian Jon Stewart was a psychology major.
- Actress Lisa Kudrow was a biology major.
- Scott Adams, creator of the *Dilbert* comic strip, was an economics major.
- Carly Fiorina, former CEO of Hewlett-Packard, was a philosophy major.

- Arnold Schwarzenegger, former Mr. Universe, film star, and now governor of California, was an economics major.
- Comedian and late night talk show host Jay Leno was a philosophy major.
- George W. Bush, former president of the United States, was a history major and is famous for saying this: "To the C students, I say, 'You, too, can be president of the United States.' "

In any case, I think you must agree by now that your major doesn't determine the first job you should seek after college.

Uncertainty Is a Good Thing

When a student is not sure of her specific job interests, that's a good sign. That's a good position to be in to start life planning work. That's a student who can have fun with the process, do self-discovery openly and honestly, and accept some of the findings without being overly cynical about them. So if you are uncertain, that's great! That's what this process is designed to resolve. You're in good company, as most students are like that, with a few interests but also a lot of divergent ideas about career direction.

There are two types of students that make career counselors really nervous: the absolutely clueless and the absolutely certain. Clueless students haven't given any thought at all to a future work life. They have willfully ignored the question. That's okay, but sooner or later it's going to come up, and then it will have to be addressed. At the other end of the spectrum, students who are absolutely certain about their career choice are equally frightening. Let's examine the second type first.

When a student tells me that she has "always wanted to be a lawyer" or "always wanted to be a doctor," alarm bells go off in my mind. This is often an ambitious student who made this decision at a very early age, perhaps as early as eight or nine years old. A parent may latch onto this early interest and reinforce it at every stage. They tell all their friends, "Jane is going to be a lawyer some day, and then a senator, and then president of the United

States of America.” This is not always good for Jane.

There is nothing wrong with having an employment idea at this age, but it needs to be retested and reconsidered as the young person develops and evolves.

So if you have “always wanted to be an endocrinologist,” I am not asking you to abandon that goal. I am only asking you to go through the process and reaffirm that goal, using work life planning techniques, and to consider other options in case you (a) discover you’re not as interested in medicine as you learn more about the profession and your personality grows and develops, or (b) discover pediatrics or radiology or audiology are more to your liking after all, or (c) discover that, by reason of your grades or your Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) scores or your recommendations or your ability to write a captivating essay in 950 words or fewer, this goal is sealed off from you.

When a student has a long-held goal, perhaps to be a novelist or a comedian or president of the United States, this is certainly useful for life planning. What is not useful is when she refuses to investigate that interest and refuses to consider other options (if for no other reason than to discard them and reaffirm the original interest).

So, if you have “always” wanted to be a research scientist, or whatever, that is when you are most in need of participating in this process with an open mind. Don’t be afraid to put your interest to the test. And be careful to listen for your own voice in the process—not someone else’s (your mother’s or society’s, just for examples).

Some of the worst career advice comes from well-meaning parents and family members. Where can you get good employment advice? From yourself. Your mother and your father and your uncle are not going to have your career. You are. So try to think about what you want out of it. We’ll talk more about this later.

First, let’s consider the student at the other end of the spectrum who has no idea at all about his job interests. He is the bane of career counselors everywhere. He may suffer from magical thinking: “This will all work out, somehow.” He isn’t particularly worried about it. Often, this type of student

can just decide to address the issue and he’s fine. Once he decides to consider life and employment planning, he participates in the process and recovers from his prior lack of attention to the issue.

Some students simply don’t think about what is involved in planning for life after college. On every campus in the country, career counselors trade stories about students who walk in for the very first time, a month or two before graduation, or a month or two after graduation, and demand to see the “List” of jobs available for graduating seniors.

There is no such List.

Again, life planning is a process of self-discovery, followed by matching the findings from the process to the actual career marketplace.

Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.

—Chinese proverb

Just as a little career counseling history: Back in the day, a career development center was called a Placement Office. Students were “placed” by a career professional. In this model, the student was a passive participant. The career professional did the assessment and the matching, and the student did as she was told. Those days are over, in large part because they did not serve the interests of the students. Students who are placed like this do not learn how to manage their own employment, and this deficiency becomes readily apparent at the first transition after placement. By the way, the tenure for college graduates in their first job is less than four years, so this comes up pretty quickly.

The placement model was abandoned; the College Placement Council, the organization that serves career center professionals, became the National Association of Colleges and Employers, and the Placement Office on most campuses became the Career Development Center or something similar.

There is some tension between parents and older administrators who themselves grew up with the placement model, and the new career professionals who employ what is called the *career education model* or the

career development model. If your parents are mad at your college or university for not handing you a job, it is because they don't understand how a contemporary career center works. **It is your job to get a job**, and the career center is there only to help you do a good job of it.

A good friend of mine, Victoria Ball, who was at the time director of the career center at an Ivy League university, received a call from a parent in late June demanding to know why her son had not gotten a job after "that expensive Ivy League education." Ms. Ball had installed a turnstile gate to the career center that required a swipe from a student ID card to get in. She also had portable card readers for recruiting and guest speaker events. Her data capture system recorded every interaction with every student served. She was able to punch up the undergrad in question on her computer screen and ask, "Your son hasn't darkened our door in four years. Why don't you ask *him* why he doesn't have a job yet?"

Don't embarrass your parents by having them make a call like this.

Is It Possible to Be Too Open?

One of the greatest challenges in career counseling is the student who is "open to anything," as in the following exchange:

"What kind of a job would interest you?"

"I dunno. Anything."

Just for the record, it is not just undergrads who do this. I was at a top-ten MBA program recently and asked a first-year student what kind of job he was going to be seeking. He actually said, "I dunno. Anything. I guess I'll just wait to see what offers come in and then pick the one that pays the most."

Wow! This is willful ignorance on a grand scale. Guess what? The top MBA program you're enrolled in has no List either.

Again, this is not a problem if the student has just not yet considered life after graduation. In other words, if this type of student participates actively in life planning, then "No harm, no foul." He can recover, learn how this works, and succeed.

However, there is a final subcategory of student who is more dangerously

clueless, and this is the one who insists on remaining clueless. He is in a slightly bigger pickle. He refuses to rise to his own assistance. If a student has no job goals and insists on hanging on to his position, then there is a train wreck in his future.

When a student is clueless and insists on embracing his cluelessness, there may be several reasons for this. One may be that he has not yet learned to live his own life—to "own" his own life. He is living his life either for or against his parents or some other authority figure. If he is living his life for this figure, he will embrace the decision he is offered and refuse to consider any evidence that it is possibly a less-than-stellar plan. This happens when someone embraces a career direction that they have no talent for, interest in, or likelihood of attaining. He is cluelessly committed to the unattainable. If he is living his life against a parental figure, then he will willfully choose to fail, secretly desiring either attention or to teach the parent a lesson for his or her over- or under-involvement. This is called disengagement. In either case, the problem is surmountable.

If you think this is you, I suggest you realize that you are in charge right now. Living your life for or against the dictates of a parental or other societal authority figure is actually a waste of your time. Seek some intervention if you cannot shake off this mindset.

Finally, those students who for any reason do not work on life goals before graduation will have ample opportunity to do so after graduation. This issue will not go away, and if you prefer, you can work on it later while living in your parents' basement.

Sometimes this is the right choice. If you're a senior overwhelmed by a heavy schoolwork load, or you have a major project due a month before graduation, or you have to work nights to pay your way through college, it is not necessarily a wrong-minded choice to put this off until the day after graduation. You are not superhuman, and there really are limits to how much you can get done during the school year.

CASE STUDY Getting a Job—Julie L.

Julie L. was described by her career center director as “a perfect candidate” who did all the right things. She had internships and appropriate volunteer experiences. She took leadership roles on campus. She studied hard to make good grades. This is her story of how she got her first full-time job after college. Note the combination of luck and hard work. Julie’s experiences prove the old saying, “The harder I work, the luckier I get!” Interview with Julie:

“It all goes back to before college even started. In high school I really liked being a camp counselor, so I did that again after my freshman year. Then I realized it was important to take jobs and participate in activities that could apply to my future career. I sure didn’t want to be a camp counselor after college!

“My first move was to volunteer to plan a reunion for my sorority, ZTA. Only about twenty people had been showing up for reunions, but I had bigger ideas. I made a website, recruited an advisory panel, created some ‘big draw’ events, a casino night, a tour of the Bush Presidential Library, and a wine tasting tour—and 350 people came! It was a lot of work, but I met 350 Zetas who were powerful and well connected. The relationships I made as a result of this event became the primary anchor of my career network.

“The other anchor was that I was an Aggie (Texas A&M University student). The A&M connection is just really strong. If you’re wearing an Aggie ring, you’re going to get the benefit of the doubt from any other Aggie. All students have a built-in network with alumni, I guess.

“After my success with the reunion, I decided to try to learn more about event planning. As an officer of the Liberal Arts Student Council, I was automatically on the Career Center Advisory Board. I mentioned my interest in event planning at a meeting, and a staff member wrote a woman’s name on the back of his business card. It was a large trade show company out of Irving, Texas. I looked up their website. The next day I called her and left a voice mail, and I shot her an email with my resume and mentioned that I was referred by the career center, that I was secretary of my college, and threw in some details about the reunion I had planned. I found out later, she was most impressed by the fact I had done a return-on-investment analysis of our

promotional expenditures. I just threw that in at the last minute, but it was what caught her eye.

“She shot me an email back saying she was going to be on campus the next week. I met her in my suit. I was a junior, and I was nervous, but I had looked up quite a bit of information on the company. I knew what they did, about their events, their clients, and I was able to relate what she did to what I had done, on a smaller scale of course. I got an internship offer. It was only \$15 an hour, but it was great experience. That summer I wrote press releases and had some articles published. I met an editor at the company who was a Zeta. She let me write a special-interest piece on geeks playing music at trade shows: ‘Heart of Rock ‘n’ Roll Beating in Tech Industry.’ This became another addition to my portfolio.

“I wrote articles for them all through the following school year, and did promotions work for events on the East Coast. This added up to journalism, promotions, and marketing experience, all originating from that \$15-an-hour internship. The company offered me a job after graduation, but I would have had to start in sales. That didn’t seem to be a match to me, so I began to look around. Time was running out for me to come up with an option.

“Spring semester of my senior year I was taking a media writing class, and the professor referred me to the public information officer for the city of Bryan (Texas). I called the PIO and asked for an internship, or at least some assignments. He said he couldn’t pay me, but he could let me write some press releases. The PIO taught me a lot by helping me build my portfolio, even though I was working for free! I also picked up a media consulting assignment in Austin during city council elections.

“Meanwhile, a Zeta connection mentioned that a man from her church was looking for a legal assistant at his law firm. I thought it sounded interesting, but she didn’t remember his name. So I had to email her repeatedly to get his contact info. Finally, she forwarded his name and email address. I sent him an email and attached two writing samples. He wrote back that my Zeta contact was very well respected, so I came highly recommended. He asked me to write in two hundred words why I thought this job would be good for me. I love to write, so I did it overnight. Two hundred words exactly, in case

he was counting. ‘Great sample,’ he said, and I was invited for an interview. “I was offered the job during the interview. I called my parents and said, ‘I got a job! I got a job!’ I was so excited! “That’s how I got my first real career job.”

CASE STUDY *Getting the Right Job—Julie L.*

“At least I thought it was a real career job. I was told I would get to do corporate communications, work on the firm newsletter, and communicate with clients. I told them I was interested in lobbying, and that I’d worked with many VIPs and big-name donors through ZTA and my term as Liberal Arts Student Council president. They seemed to be quite responsive to these interests. They told me I could work with one of their lobbyists who was working on [a special interest issue].

“But that’s not what happened. I graduated, I moved to Houston, and right away I knew I was in trouble. They wanted me to sit at a front desk, look pretty, and transcribe dictation for eight hours a day. I tried to just do it, but I could feel myself losing brain cells every day. This job didn’t even require a college degree! I knew I would have to start at the bottom, but I knew there had to be more to it. So I sat down with my boss and told him, ‘I can do more than this.’ I reminded him that I had been president of an organization serving 6,500 students, that I had been writing official communications for the city of Bryan and for a political campaign in Austin, that I had a college degree from a challenging program, and that I had served on policy-developing committees.

“He said I’d have to stick it out for a year. ‘It’ll take a year for you to grow into this position,’ were his exact words.

“I was so mad at myself for taking that job. It was so frustrating, because you want to have faith in people, but they were clearly not going to honor their promises to me. I even had a job description with those promises on it, which they completely ignored. So disappointing. And scary. I was on my own, responsible for my own bills. It’s so easy in college, because everything

is temporary. If you don’t like something, you don’t have to worry. It’s over soon enough. But in a job, that’s not the case. If you need change, you have to create it. You just have to put in a leap of faith and know that you’ll find something, find where you need to be. So I gave my notice. I can’t believe it, but they were totally shocked. What did they think would happen? I gave them a chance to do something to spice up the job, but they literally wanted me to do data entry for a year first. And sit out front and look pretty.

“I immediately alerted everyone on my network that I was on the market in an emergency sort of way. I was on the phone on every break and sending out emails all night. It was quite a production.

“A friend of mine back at school was very involved in College Republicans. I emailed him about my interest in lobbying and politics and explained the problem with my current job. He forwarded my email to [a friend of his], who was working on a congressional campaign. [The candidate] himself called me, and we talked politics. He wanted to know if I was conservative, what I had done in the past, what I wanted out of a job. I just told him what I thought, like he was anybody else. I guess he liked what he heard, because he set up a phone interview with his campaign manager for the next day.

“Then I met with the campaign manager and [the candidate] in Houston. The campaign was in full swing, and they needed a scheduler and press secretary to replace someone leaving right away. It was keeping track of a thousand details a day, seven days a week, and a lot of writing on the fly. It meant a huge cut in pay, but I didn’t care. I thought, ‘I’ll learn a ton, and I agree with [the candidate’s] positions. This is a risk worth taking.’

“Well, the candidate won. Now I’m in Washington, D.C., with a huge increase in pay, serving as his executive assistant and scheduler. I have more responsibility than a twenty-three-year-old could get anywhere else. Time is a politician’s most important resource. Any constituent or lobbyist who wants to see the congressman must go through me first. I have to understand current legislation so I can prioritize meetings. I have to work well with constituents and maintain the trust of the congressman and his family. It is very much a public relations role. I’m using all my skills every day, while

gaining new ones as fast as I can.

“Sometimes you just have to go for it to get a job you’ll love.”

The Role of Parental Advice

What is the purpose of a college education? This book is, in part, an answer to this question. At its beginnings in 1636, higher education in this country was designed to foster and nurture God-fearing citizens and an educated ministry. Later, post-secondary education became a training ground for primary and secondary school teachers. Recently, college has become what high school had always been until now—a springboard for a successful life.

A generation ago, it was still an elite experience. Families were happy simply to have their children in college at all. They left the structure and purpose of the college experience to the experts, namely, the faculty and the administrators.

In just one generation, however, college has become the norm. Most parents of college students have themselves been to college. Families now approach the whole college experience as consumers. They want to know about the cost versus the benefit of this college versus that university. They want to know about career outcomes, class size, and the percentage of faculty with a terminal degree. They want to know what each school’s admission rate is for applicants to medical school or law school. They want to know the hours for the swimming pool and the gym.

In one sense families have become sophisticated, but in another sense they have not. In short, families are sometimes wrong.

Well-meaning parents don’t always provide the most accurate advice about careers and the relationship between job choices and education. The student needs to sort through and select the advice that makes sense for her. She also needs to balance their advice with recommendations from faculty, peers, and counselors.

This is not to say that your parents’ intentions are not laudable. What they want for their children is clear: for college to provide the foundation for a successful life and, most of all, to be sure their offspring “launch.” Failure to

launch is a big problem in America, as students with \$100,000 or even \$200,000 educations come home to live in the basement or over the garage, while waiting for a message from some unseen god of employment. Increasingly, young people are living at home after college, even if they have a good job.

This can be attributed in part to the disappearance of the generation gap, because parent-child values don’t actually diverge much now. Part of it may be due to parental guilt at not providing you with a pre-Simpsons TV-sitcom version of home life. Heavy student debt loads combined with low starting salaries and the high cost of housing are no doubt contributing factors. But parents’ most consistent fear is that their children will go to college and emerge unprepared to make their own way in the world. So behind most parental career advice is the nagging worry that their young adults will fail to become independent.

There used to be a grand tradition in this country of “fooling around” for a year or two after college. From the mid-sixties to the early eighties, it was perfectly normal to spend a year hitchhiking through Europe, backpacking in the Andes, or fishing in Alaska after college. Even spending time in the parents’ basement wasn’t considered all that bad. The classic movie *The Graduate* is a case study on this topic, although not a particularly happy one. A generation of career counselors advocated for the positive aspects of “floundering,” as one last chance for self-discovery and to get it right before entering the working world.

I do not disagree with this theory, but parents are increasingly hard to sell on it. With oppressive debt loads and a sense that life today is hypercompetitive, parents want their young adults to leave college and hit the ground running. The old tradition of a tour, or a walkabout, or one last hurrah has pretty much died. So don’t be surprised if your own parents took time off during and after college but don’t want you to!

By the way, if you want your parents to accept your career choices, prove to them that you will be able to pay your own way without further support. This needs to be a major part of your rationale if you want their endorsement of any adventures or experiments.

The most successful people are those who do all year long what they would otherwise do on their summer vacation.

—Mark Twain

Parental involvement in itself is not a bad idea, but in practice it often suffers from two mistakes: (1) the idea that a college or a major or a career is good, better, or best in itself, rather than in relation to a particular student (you), and (2) the idea that a major determines job choices. So if parents are going to be involved, it might be useful to provide them with an updated understanding of what you'll be facing today. Share some of the data in this chapter, and above all else remember this: **It's your path, not theirs.** So choose one you're going to enjoy, that your skills and talents will make you likely to succeed in, and that complements your ideas of the life you'd like to lead. Be sure you can earn enough money to be comfortable and independent, because the alternate outcome is certainly unpleasant: to earn so little that you find yourself dependent on your parents, the government, friends, or the kindness of strangers.

Oh, and by the way, the real purpose of a college education is this: To find out what makes you happy. That's what a great deal of this book is about. College should also give you the skills you'll need to be capable of pursuing what makes you happy once you discover what it is. But if you have the skills without that knowledge, then you're all dressed up with nowhere to go; you're armed and dangerous but unsure of your target; you're a power for good but unsure of what good really is.

The true journey of discovery does not consist in searching for new territories, but in having new eyes.

—Marcel Proust