TALKING WITH COLLEGE STUDENTS ABOUT CAREERS

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In a televised special, comedienne Paula Poundstone once asked the audience members how many knew what careers they wanted to pursue. As the camera scanned the sparse showing of hands, Poundstone quipped: “That’s why we’re always asking little kids what THEY want to be when they grow up… because WE’RE all looking for IDEAS!”

Indeed, the very thought of career planning strikes fear in the hearts of many students. The implication is that one false step, one wrong decision, and life will be unfulfilled at best, ruined at worse. With that kind of pressure, it is understandably difficult for college students to discuss their career plans and uncertainties. As career counselors at the James W. Stuckert Career Center, our goal is to share a less threatening reality—that careers “unfold” and “develop,” one small decision at a time. There are twists along the path, but few wrong turns. All experience and knowledge your student acquires, both in and out of the college classroom, will help develop skills that may be used in many different careers and employment settings.

Because your role as a parent has been, and will continue to be, one of the most influential in your son or daughter’s career choice, the following “tricks of the career counselor’s trade” are offered for your consideration and use in navigating the sometimes murky waters of career discussions.

Be an “Encourager”

• Whether your student seems to have definite career goals, or is still uncertain about the future, encourage career exploration before career choice. The college experience is meant to expand options before narrowing them. In any given group of underclassmen I have spoken with in the past 25 years, the maximum number of different careers students typically generate through collective brainstorming is 50-60. The Occupational Outlook Handbook, a government publication, describes 250 career fields and related occupations in detail; these are the 250 careers that about 90% of the US population enters. The Dictionary of Occupational Titles lists briefer descriptions of over 25,000 job titles. If left unchallenged and uneducated, these students would be making their career choices from extremely limited options.

• To foster career exploration, resist the urge to give your nod of parental approval too early in the process. By sharing your experience and knowledge, rather than your opinions and judgements, you allow your student to “save face” when s/he inevitably decides to scrap previously stated plans and explore other options. This is a natural part of the process.

Be a “Myth Buster”
Students sometimes avoid or postpone seeking help with career decisions due to faulty assumptions that are prevalent and counter-productive to exploring careers.

- Finding a career direction is a “process” not a one time “event.” This process is simple and can easily be applied to many different life choices. The first step of self-assessment involves identification of personal interests, values and skills. In the second step, career exploration, a list of career alternatives is generated that possibly meet one’s needs. Thirdly, assessing the alternatives by evaluating the “fit” between the individual’s needs and the career field’s rewards is accomplished by talking and reading about the alternatives as well as seeking shadowing experiences and internships. And, finally, implementing the decision involves declaring a major, focusing on a career, or applying for a specific job. If the decision is deemed less than satisfactory, one simply backs up and re-enters the process at the appropriate step, doing more self-assessment and/or career exploration.

- Be assured, and assuring, that there is more than one good career fit for your son or daughter. Students are often overcome by “analysis paralysis” when they labor under the false assumption that there is only one perfect career for them and they must find it or be doomed to failure. All individuals are multi-talented with hundreds of skills developed in academic, employment, social and family settings. These skills will transfer to a number of different employment environments. Since the goal of most college students (and parents) is to find rewarding employment or graduate studies programs after college, Bill Coplin’s book, 10 Things Employers Want You To Learn in College, will likely be an enlightening and practical read.

- There is not always a direct link between majors and careers. In over two decades of researching the college major/career connection, Dr. Lawrence R. Malnig found that in some business and science fields, less than 50 percent of graduates went into jobs that related directly to their majors. In the humanities and liberal arts the results were less than 25%. His findings, similar to our observations at the University of Kentucky’s Career Center, are that many jobs routinely draw on a much wider variety of majors than most students imagine. By encouraging your student to study something s/he loves, you will almost assuredly be promoting career “fitness.” All academic majors promote critical thinking skills—understanding concepts as well as details and making connections between abstract and specific meanings—that are important in most occupations. In addition, encourage your student to “tailor” their field of academic study by seeking volunteer work, cooperative education and internship positions, student organizations and leadership roles, service learning or summer and part-time jobs in career-related areas to add breadth and depth to their academic pursuits.

**Probe Rather than Pry**

As parents of college students, who among us has not experienced the sinking feeling of a “disconnect” when trying to engage our sons and daughters in conversations about their plans? If we proceed slowly, choose our timing for periods of relaxed and uninterrupted time, we can be valuable sounding boards in the career decision-making process.
Ask “open-ended” questions that begin with “how,” “what,” “where,” and “when.” Avoid starting your questions with the word “why” which often puts your listener on the defensive. By staying away from questions that can be answered with a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no,’ you will be more likely to keep conversations flowing and encourage further exploration. For example:

- “What are some ways of working with people that you have enjoyed the most?”
- “What settings or environments seem appealing to you when you think about work?”
- “What issues are you passionate about that you would like to make a difference about?”
- “How do you suppose you could get some work experience using the skills you’re developing as an English major?”
- “Whenever you talk about doing research in your biology class, your eyes really seem to light up. What type of research do you enjoy the most?”
- “What classes have you enjoyed the most these past two years? Disliked?”
- “If you weren’t worried about making money (or, how fast you want to pay off your student loans) where would you like to work? Doing what kinds of things?”

**Observe and Label Strengths and Skills**

Many students will discount parental praise as too subjective to be meaningful. Rather than heap general praise and accolades, even though well-deserved, your objective, non-judgmental observations sometimes carry more weight, e.g.

- “You appear comfortable and sound persuasive when you speak to small groups. How do you feel when you’re doing that?”
- “You seem to have a flair for______________________________.”
- “How did you go about raising money for your group? It sounds like you had to make contact with people you didn’t know and convince them you had a good cause.”

The career decision-making process is easy to learn and applicable to many of life’s major decisions. As a positive and powerful influence in your student’s life, you have many opportunities to help with the self-assessment and occupational exploration that lead to satisfying and rewarding career choices. Encourage your student to get involved in the process—it’s only too late if s/he doesn’t start! The Career Center staff is eager and ready to help.

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