

10 Tips for Parents of Prospective College Students

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One of the most valuable things parents can do to help a student with career planning is listen: be open to ideas, try to help your student find information, and be nonjudgmental.

Here are 10 ways you can help:

1. Encourage your child to visit the career center (and you go too!)

Next time you visit campus, drop into the career services office and pick up a business card from one of the career counselors. When your son or daughter is feeling anxious about his/her future, offer the card and say, "Please call this person. He (or she) can help you."

Many students use their first semester to "settle into" college life, and so perhaps the spring semester of the freshman year is the optimal time to start using career center services. And, it's a good time for you to prompt that first visit.

Ask your student (in an off-handed way), "Have you visited the career center?" If you hear, "You only go there when you are a senior," then it's time to reassure them that career services is not just for seniors, and meeting with a career counselor can take place at any point (and should take place frequently) in their college career. The sooner a student becomes familiar with the staff, resources, and programs, the better prepared he or she will be to make wise career decisions.

Many centers offer a full range of career development and job-search help including:

- mock interviews,
- a network of alumni willing to talk about their jobs and careers,
- a library of books on a wide range of careers,
- workshops on writing resumes and cover letters,
- a recruiting program, and
- individual advising.

2. Advise your student to write a resume

Writing a resume can be a "reality test" and can help a student identify weak areas that require improvement. Suggest your student get sample resumes from the career center, from books at the public library, or online.

You can review resume drafts for grammar, spelling, and content, but recommend that the final product be critiqued by a career center professional.

3. Challenge your student to become "occupationally literate"

Ask: "Do you have any ideas about what you might want to do when you graduate?"

If your student seems unsure, you can talk about personal qualities you see as talents and strengths. You can also recommend:

- Taking a "self-assessment inventory," such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator or the Campbell Interest and Skill Survey at the career center,
- Talking to favorite faculty members,
- Researching a variety of interesting career fields and employers.

A career decision should be a process and not a one-time, last-minute event: Discourage putting this decision off until the senior year.

4. Allow your student to make the decision

Even though it is helpful to ask occasionally about career plans, too much prodding can backfire.

Myth: A student must major in something "practical" or marketable.

Truth: Students should follow their own interests and passions.

Myth: Picking your major means picking the career you will have forever.

Truth: That's not true anymore. "Major" does not necessarily mean "career", and it is not unusual for a student to change majors. Many students change majors after gaining more information about specific fields of study and career fields of interest. Many students end up doing something very different than originally planned, so don't freak out when they come up with an outrageous or impractical career idea. Chances are plans will develop and change. It's okay to change majors - and careers.

It's okay to make suggestions about majors and career fields, but let your student be the ultimate judge of what's best.

Career development can be stressful. Maybe this is the first really big decision that your son or daughter has had to make. Be patient, sympathetic and understanding, even if you don't agree with your child's decisions.

5. Emphasize the importance of internships

The career center will not "place" your child in a job at graduation. Colleges grant degrees, but not job guarantees, so having relevant experience in this competitive job market is critical.

Your son or daughter can sample career options by completing internships and experimenting with summer employment opportunities or volunteer work.

Why an internship?

- Employers are interested in communication, problem-solving, and administrative skills, which can be developed through internships.

- Employers look for experience on a student's resume and often hire from within their own internship programs.
- Having a high GPA is not enough.
- A strong letter of recommendation from an internship supervisor can often tip the scale of an important interview in their favor.

6. Encourage extracurricular involvement

Part of experiencing college life is to be involved and active outside the classroom. Interpersonal and leadership skills - qualities valued by future employers - are often developed in extracurricular activities.

7. Persuade your student to stay up-to-date with current events

Employers will expect students to know what is happening around them. Buy your student a subscription to the New York Times or the Wall Street Journal. When they are home on break, discuss major world and business issues with them.

8. Expose your student to the world of work

Most students have a stereotypical view of the workplace. Take your child to your workplace. Explain to your son or daughter what you do for a living. Show him or her how to network by interacting with your own colleagues. Help your student identify potential employers.

9. Teach the value of networking

Introduce your student to people who have the careers/jobs that are of interest. Suggest your son or daughter contact people in your personal and professional networks for information on summer jobs. Encourage your child to "shadow" someone in the workplace to increase awareness of interesting career fields.

10. Help the career center

Call your campus career center when you have a summer, part-time or full-time job opening. The staff will help you find a hard-working student. If your company hires interns, have the internships listed in the career center. Join the campus career center's career advisory network and use your "real world" experience to advise students of their career options, participate in a career panel or career related workshop.