

Guide to Career Planning

Early planning can save wasted time



Peggy McAllister works with student in her Hanes Hall office

What's the best major to select if you want to go into banking? How about management? The computer industry? If your answer is business or computer science, then you may be living with a 1970s mentality about preparing for your future.

"Back in the 1960s, all it took was a bachelor's degree in almost any field to land a good professional job," said Peggy McAllister, a career planning counselor with University Career Planning and Placement which advises freshmen, sophomores and juniors on the best ways to prepare for various career fields.

"The '60s student could take a very passive approach to preparing for his or her future. Then in the 1970s, the job market got tighter, and specialization greatly increased. Students were encouraged to pick the 'right' major for their intended career. We had business majors going into business jobs, science majors going into scientific fields, education majors going into teaching, and liberal arts majors going wherever they could find a job — many of whom ended up in graduate school. The majority of the 1960s and 1970s students took a very

passive approach to preparing for their futures. Most waited until their senior year to begin thinking about a career, hoping that the 'right majors' would open the right doors upon graduation. Unfortunately for many people, senior year and the years following presented a succession of frustrating experiences."

Often, students are not encouraged to talk with anyone about how to prepare for their future.

"I had a passive attitude toward my education," said Rick Palmer, director of instructional development at UNC's Media Center. "Now I believe that if you don't make an active choice in that area, then circumstances are going to drag you around."

McAllister blames several lost years after graduation on a lack of career planning during her college years.

"I knew I wanted to help people, so I chose psychology as a major. Beyond that, I never tested out my career fantasies. It never occurred to me to learn about the different types of helping professions beyond a superficial understanding. The real jolt came during my first semester in graduate school when my career fantasies

crumbled as they met up with reality. It took me three years of trial and error with various jobs and other experiences before I was able to define a clear career path for myself."

The 1980s student needs to change his or her concept about preparing for careers, she said:

"It always seems such a shame when I encounter a student who's decided to major in business or computer science when Shakespeare and Thoreau are their first loves. Such students really need to hear that there are many ways to become marketable while studying a subject they enjoy. All it takes is early planning, and knowledge of effective career planning techniques."

Many students are still under the impression that the best way to prepare for a career is to pick the "right major." While this is true for some very technical careers, for accounting careers, and a few others, most entry-level positions require skills that can be developed in any number of ways. An academic major represents only one of several options students can choose from in planning for a

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Psst! Want a job? Here's some tips

Getting a job often seems like a job in itself, especially in difficult economic times. But there are jobs out there, and students who are willing to commit themselves to the time and effort required in the process are finding satisfying entry-level professional jobs.

There are some tips that experts advise job seekers to use when searching for those elusive employment opportunities:

- Think positively. A mind-set in which you as a job candidate determine to analyze the accomplishments that demonstrate successful coping with life is the first step towards effective articulation of goals and personal abilities to a potential employer. You know best what personal qualities and skills can be used to open up new opportunities, and if you do not promote those abilities and qualities, no one else will do it for you. Look at all your experiences — not just those that came through paid employment. Your real strengths may have been revealed far more clearly in extracurricular activities, community involvement or academic performance.

- Target your efforts. Begin by deciding that you will concentrate your attention upon a particular geographical area or a certain field of employment. Such focus provides a more manageable search and increases the likelihood of making more relevant personal contacts and being able to articulate your possible contributions to a specific situation.

- Use every source of job information possible. In order to keep the flow of information about job openings as broad as possible, use classified advertisements in newspapers and professional journals, job-related information offered by family, friends and acquaintances, state and federal government agencies, placement offices, and perhaps employment agencies as sources of vacancy leads. In addition, do not be afraid to extend yourself to initiate contact with individuals whom you may not know, but who would be willing to talk with you about career opportunities in a particular field or a specific organization and about the most effective way to land those jobs.

- Assume that a job might be available anywhere. A vast "hidden market" of jobs exists that is never made public. That market can be tapped to some extent by using the contacts you have made and by direct approaches to employing organizations to persuade them of your interest and your motivation. Broaden your horizons, too, to include types of organizations that in better economic times you might overlook because they seem to be too small or too local to satisfy you. Challenging positions can be found in all organizations, and experience in a smaller organization does not rule out the possibility of association with a more nationally-known organization in the future. Statistics point to the fact that 65 to 75 percent of new hirings each year are created by firms with 25 or fewer employees.

- Tailor your resume and interview to a particular situation. Research the general functional area for which you are applying for employment and study job descriptions in that field carefully to determine what personal qualities and actual skills will be useful there. Describe your own experience in the language of the field, and analyze your total life experience to indicate where you have exhibited those qualities and skills yourself. Specific examples drawn from your work, schooling, or extracurricular experiences will make you more memorable to a potential employer than vague generalizations about your character and your abilities like "I'm a good worker."

- Know your career goals, your strengths and your weaknesses. Employers like to hire individuals who display the ability to make careful, thoughtful decisions, and usually the thought-processes which brought you to college and led to your decision to seek work in a particular field is a clear demonstration of your rational decision-making ability. A process of self-analysis, also, reveals an attitude of personal self-worth and willingness to learn from experience. Don't apologize for instances where success was not complete, but indicate

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Degrees in liberal arts can make jobs with help

"A liberal education teaches you how to operate a very special piece of machinery: your mind," states the Association of American Colleges. "It teaches you judgement, historical perspective, the ability to reason, and the art of communication . . . four skills that are more necessary than ever to meet the challenge of the future."

Despite this, however, many students are advised by parents or peers to avoid studies in the liberal arts because they are often thought to be impractical when the time comes to put a college education to work in the job market.

But today, liberal arts majors who have done some early career planning at UNC are finding some very good positions.

"Recent UNC liberal arts grads have taken positions in marketing management, banking, manufacturing management, computer sales, corporate communications, and more," said Vicki Lotz, liberal arts placement counselor at University Career Planning and Placement. "Companies who have hired UNC liberal arts grads have included Wachovia, Duke Power, American Hospital Supply, the Federal Reserve Bank and General Electric, among others."

Many employers are now finding that attracting liberal arts majors is in their own best

interest. Recent studies by firms like AT&T and Chase Manhattan Bank show that liberal arts majors are promoted more rapidly than technical majors, and that those with undergraduate degrees in liberal arts develop stronger banking skills than those with graduate or MBA degrees. Many firms are now beginning to join the ranks of General Motors, American Can and Morgan Stanley, who have established programs especially to recruit and train liberal arts grads.

Despite the growing trend by many firms to encourage the hiring of liberal arts grads, not all companies are eager to hire them. Some of the more standard reasons companies give for not hiring liberal arts grads include:

- A lack of exposure to basic business procedures — especially in financial and accounting areas.

- Lack of career direction.
- Failure to communicate skills and strengths that would relate to positions.

- Lack of technical skills.
- Failure to research career in enough depth.

- Lack of career-related experience.

Such obstacles can be overcome, however, by liberal arts students who plan wisely for their futures. Proper communication skills will also help to overcome these obstacles.