Helping Students Graduate with a Degree and a Job

Jumpstart Your Career While You’re in College!

By Kim Dority

Your degree program is a terrific way for you to develop your skills and knowledge — and it’s also a great opportunity for you to start building your career launch platform. Ready to start moving toward a career that’s both personally and financially rewarding? The following actions will help you jumpstart your career while you’re still in college:

Set your personal career agenda early on. Although your goals in college are probably to 1) survive, 2) learn the skills you need to land a great job, and 3) get good grades, you’ll also want to focus on setting your own individual “career agenda” as soon as you start that first class. That means identifying what things you can do to move you closer to your dream job and career while you’re nailing items 1, 2, and 3…. Who do you need to meet? What professional skills do you need to develop? What career information do you need to gather, and who’s got it? Putting together your career agenda early on in the program will help you make sure that as you work your way through your degree courses, you’re focusing as much on what will happen after you graduate as you are on acing your assignments.

Multipurpose your course assignments. Whenever possible, use your assignments to connect with potential employers, clients, and/or colleagues. Generally, people are amazingly willing to talk to students doing research for a class assignment. Do a dynamite job on that assignment, and then perhaps send a copy of it to the person you interviewed, thereby dazzling him or her with your smarts and initiative and building a professional relationship in the process.

When you can, think about turning parts of your assignments into blog posts, articles, and online content contributions. Your goal is to start building visibility as an intelligent, knowledgeable person in your area of interest, so that when potential employers “look you up” online, they’ll find evidence of your professional value.

Create your own learning assignments. As you work your way through your degree’s courses, you’ll be mastering a substantial amount of knowledge in your degree field. However, in addition to that knowledge base, you’ll also want to build some key professional and/or business skills while you can practice them in a safe environment. For example, you’ll want to learn how to write clearly, how to present to a group, how to make (and defend) decisions, how to lead a team or work effectively as a team member.

Also, you’ll want to learn how you most effectively learn – is it by listening to a lecture, watching a demonstration, writing up and outlining class notes, drawing “maps” of related ideas? Your college courses provide a great opportunity for you to figure out what learning approach works best for you, which will be a very useful career skill as you continue to go after new opportunities.

Explore how many different ways your degree skills can be used. Pepper your guest speakers with questions about their careers, do as many information interviews as you can (possibly as a course assignment?), join LinkedIn groups related to your degree field, and consider joining professional associations in your area of interest (at the student rate!) to learn more about who does what, and how/where they do it.

Professional associations also often have career sections that describe the various career opportunities available, and some may have mentor programs that you can join as a student. Some questions to ask: what types of organizations employ people with your skills? For-profit (businesses) or non-profit? Government agencies? Can this
work be done as an independent, and if so, who does that and how? Are there other alternative or nontraditional ways of using your degree?

**Figure out what type of work you enjoy.** Your classes and assignments will give you a great opportunity to explore not only what job options might be available to you, but also which ones you might enjoy the most. Use your class assignments whenever possible to learn about various types of work and work environments, and then think about what appeals to you (or doesn’t) about that career path.

For example, some people thrive in high-intensity, high-adrenaline workplaces (think IT start-ups, emergency rooms, etc.) while others find they can contribute most effectively (and happily) in a more predictable work situation. Also, do you gravitate to team activities, or prefer working independently? These are some of the questions you can be asking yourself as you progress through your program.

**Start a career journal to record your career ideas, questions, plans, and action items.** A career journal or log, which can be as simple as an inexpensive binder, will help you capture your career questions and ideas as they come to you. When you read an article about a career or job that interests you, make a note of it so you don’t forget to track it down...or perhaps you can figure out how to find out more about it as part of a class assignment.

As you start planning your post-graduation career strategy, your career journal/log is the place to note your action items and checklists. Even if you don’t act on them immediately, you’ll have captured the information for when you are ready to take action.

**Hit the college library!** And don’t just hit the library – become best friends with the librarian. College librarians often have some very useful career databases and resources at their fingertips that aren’t available to non-students, so take advantage of them now while you can.

These resources can tell you about potential career paths, salary expectations, trends, whether and where your field is expanding or contracting, what issues the profession is facing, where major employers are, their hiring plans, and just about anything you’d need to know to have a competitive edge in the job-hunting and/or career-advancement arena. Librarians know really cool stuff and they like to share what they know!

**If your school has a Career Services person, check in early and often.** Don’t wait until you’re ready to graduate – start building a relationship with your career services person early on and stay in touch while you progress through your program. Career Services may know about valuable internships, may be able to help you make connections for part-time work, and will be able to offer resources and guidance about possible career paths you’re considering. Remember: check in early and often – you want to be on their radar!

**Practice doing scary stuff.** College is a great place to practice new or scary activities – like standing up in front of a classroom and giving a presentation, or leading a virtual team – because the costs of being less-than-perfect may be just some slight embarrassment, not job loss.

Think of your time in college as a dress rehearsal for the skills you’ll need on the job (including working as a team member or leader, making group presentations, writing a compelling business memo, etc.), and push yourself to do those things that seem scariest to you. The more you practice, the better you get; the better you get, the more confidence you’ll have; the more confidence you have, the more you’ll impress an employer.

**Take a leadership role in your career – and your future.** By choosing to enroll in a degree or certificate program that will open up better career opportunities for you, you’ve already demonstrated your willingness to do what it takes to change your life. You’ve already proven to yourself (and those around you) that you’re willing to act, you’re willing to work hard, you’re willing to give up time today for a better life tomorrow. Those are all characteristics of becoming the leader – the hero – of your own life. They are also characteristics very much in demand by employers today.

To keep on this path, you’ll want to always take responsibility for your choices and for your outcomes. Personal and career resiliency come down to just this: that when life knocks you down, you make a personal decision to get back up, every time. You’re the hero of your own life – what can you do today in your class, or in an assignment, or for a classmate, that will help you get up and keep moving toward your dream career?