A college timeline for your career development
How to make the most of your career services office, year by year  Priscilla March | 6/5/2007

Among incoming college freshmen, only rarely does a visit to the career services office rank up there in importance with meeting roommates, finding class locations, dealing with homesickness, and generally getting up to speed on the campus scene. But truth be told, students who use their career service center early and often get the best benefit.

Contrary to popular opinion, career services are not just for students nearing graduation. In fact, if you visit your career services office well before your senior year, you will:

- Be given resources and information helpful in determining your course of study
- Learn effective ways to market yourself to potential employers
- Have a leg up on finding job and internship opportunities; and
- Be taking the appropriate steps to move into professional positions with relative ease upon graduation.

We recommend that students come into our offices each and every year of their college careers to use our services. Chances are good that your school makes available most or all of the following services - all for free - laid out here in a four-year timeline:

FRESHMAN YEAR

Starting to explore majors and careers - College isn't just about preparing for employment, but let's face facts: most of us have to pay our way through life at some point! Many students come to college with, at best, a vague idea of how college will prepare them for a job once they graduate. It's definitely okay (and in many cases, preferable) to enter college as an "undeclared" student if you're not sure about what your major should be. But even an exploring student could use a map, because having a goal is important to doing well in school. If you visit your career services office, counselors there can help you begin that exploration with assessments that help you understand and articulate your interests, skills, preferences, and generally what's important to you. This self-knowledge is key to making good decisions about the types of career fields and environments that fit you best. Career counselors can help you learn about those career options and help map out a path to explore them more thoroughly in your course of study. Those options could include using the college's alumni career network to obtain advice and information about possible career paths and entry strategies.

Building a career network - From a networking perspective, building a professional working relationship with your campus's career services staff (who are good at making referrals to alumni, employers, and campus resources) will pay off dividends as you seek further opportunities in your field, or want to discuss specific job- or internship-related questions and concerns. Now's the time to get set up with an online account with career services. Most schools offer it.

Seeking internships - And freshman year isn't too soon to start looking at internships, either. Visit career services to learn about ways to seek out available internship or co-op opportunities and to get advice about applying for and obtaining these positions. You could potentially complete three or more internships during your college years, not only providing you with valuable work experience but giving you a huge boost on your resume at graduation, as well.

SOPHOMORE YEAR

Getting involved on campus - During your sophomore year the career services office can help you tap into campus organizations that will let you build the leadership skills that employers seek in new graduates. Course selection and grades are important, but extracurricular activities are, too.

Deciding on your major and career targets - If you've been exploring options for majors during your first few semesters, your career services staff can also help you refine your list. If you need more resources to help with this process, they may urge you to speak with alumni, conduct informational interviews to learn about job fields, and apply for part-time, seasonal, or internship positions in your area of interest to actually "try on" a career before making a commitment to it.

Preparing to apply for internships and jobs - Of course, the career center will work with you on preparing your resume and cover letter, and making sure that you are comfortable and effective in the interviewing process. They can also sign you up for an online account to encourage your participation in campus career events, such as job fairs and workshops, and to give you access to online services, including on-campus job recruiting activities for internships and full-time jobs.
JUNIOR YEAR

Transitioning into a four-year school? - By junior year, most students in four-year schools have settled into a major. However, if you're entering a four-year school from a two-year program, you may find it especially helpful to pay an early visit to your career services office for a discussion about how to ease into your new school. Some students find the transition to a four-year school a little overwhelming, and a career counselor's guidance on how to mold your bachelor's program into a marketable degree might be a good early step on campus. Of course, you'll want to sign up for an online career services account and the services that come with it.

Getting serious about work experience - Many juniors get serious about internships because they've got only one more summer left as a student. With good strategic planning, you've already been to career services - but if you haven't, don't delay. Counselors can help you seek internships and co-ops, prepare your application materials, and begin building work experience that will make a difference at graduation time.

Building leadership skills - Career services can also help you identify ways to build leadership skills on campus. If you haven't done so before, junior year is a good time to join professional associations, student government organizations, arts, social or sports groups, or volunteer to participate in community service organizations. All these activities will build your skill set, provide meaningful experience, and (once they're listed on your resume) help employers see you as a leader and a well-rounded individual.

SENIOR YEAR

Putting it all together - By your final year of college, you want to be packaging your educational expertise, work and internship experience, and leadership qualities that you've been developing during your schooling. In a perfect world, it would be nice if you were in a position to come to career services and say, “Okay, I researched and explored my choice of major, I chose well, I performed well, I got solid work experience and completed internships in my field. I've been involved in campus activities and even proved myself as a leader in some cases. Help me translate this into an effective job search!” However, for lots of reasons, nobody's college experience is perfect, so don't let fear or intimidation stop you from getting to career services at this important time.

Implementing your job search - Now the career center can help you plan and implement an effective job search strategy using a variety of tools: on-campus recruiting, job fairs, targeted approaches to desired employers, networking with professionals in your field, smart use of online resources, etc. They'll help you polish your resume and cover letter, navigate important application follow-up steps, and they'll coach you on interviewing skills and even help you decide how to dress to help you make that important first impression count.

Go early, go often

Remember, the key to effective use of your career services office is not waiting until the anxiety of graduation pushes you to go. Go early, go often, and begin grooming yourself for the professional world from day one.

Finally, here's another little known fact about campus career services: they're not just for students. College career centers typically offer alums some of the services offered to current students, including continued access to career counseling, vocational assessments, job search support, and alumni career networks.

Six ways to get the most from your campus career services office

1. Visit early in your college career to ask about what services are offered
2. Ask for advice on how to build experience and marketability to attract employers
3. Build a strong working relationship with the career services office - you'll benefit from it
4. Participate in events sponsored by the office - job fairs, workshops and seminars on job search topics, employer presentations, etc.
5. Take advantage of all the services offered - career counseling, practice interviews, resume/cover letter critiques, on-campus recruiting, etc.
6. Use your career center after graduation as well - access to the school's alumni career network and career counselors, for example, can be invaluable in the early stages of your career.

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