College Student's Guide to Career Decision Making

College is about many things, from learning about specific subjects and the world in general, to increasing your breadth through a broad range of new and different experiences. But for almost everybody, including those who plan to get more education, college is, at its core, primarily concerned with one thing: preparing you for a career.

"Prepare" is a qualified term. College in no way makes you an expert in any field. Only experience will do that. But what college can do is make you qualified to embark on a path to gain that experience. It gives you the necessary skills to start on a journey that probably would not have been an option had you not taken time to get your degree.

But the degree alone is not enough to ensure that such a journey will begin anytime soon. What you need, in addition to a diploma (along with the knowledge and skills it embodies), is a plan. Without a plan, you're leaving your fate up to chance, which means you could end up anywhere. It's grim but true—there are over-qualified, under-employed college grads waiting tables in every city in the country. Especially during tough economic times such as these. But even during tough times, there are also grads from every college and university who end up on stellar career paths, immediately upon leaving school.

What is the difference between the two? Raw talent? Connections? Luck? Yes, sometimes. But there is one thing that consistently differentiates between those who let life happen to them and those who take active control over their own careers, lives, and destinies. To get where you want to go, you must make some decisions, and then make a plan.

It is Essential to Have a Plan

A student without a post-college plan is much less likely to get off to an early start than a student with a plan. The importance of formulating a plan, as early as possible, cannot be overstressed. Indeed, freshman year is not too early to be thinking about your first job out of school. This is because college affords many opportunities, aside from your chosen major, to increase your chances of getting a great job. Opportunities include summer jobs, internships, extracurricular activities, and even the specific courses you take (both electives and those related to your major). Imagine yourself as the employer who's interviewing two potential job candidates. Would you rather hire somebody who's only evidence of commitment to your field is that she says she's interested, or the candidate who has been interning and otherwise increasing his exposure to your field for years?

All other things being equal, the job will go to the candidate who can demonstrate the commitment. Not only will his interest level be higher (a good predictor of job success), but so will his actual relevant experience (an even better predictor).

The importance of having a plan now (or as soon as possible) becomes even more important further down the road. The distant future can be tough to plan for, and may even seem totally irrelevant to most college students, but the simple (and sometimes sad) truth is that many people's first "real" job out of school, for better or worse, sets them on a track that can be difficult to switch later. This is because skills and experience come mostly from where you have worked and what you did while you were there.

The next job offer or promotion is likely to pay more because of what you have learned at the last job. But if you didn't like the job function or industry where you worked, then you might need to start over from square one in a new company or industry. It can be difficult to say "no" to enticing offers that come along, even when the jobs don't sound too exciting, if the pay is good.
This upward spiral of pay increases often draws people increasingly deeper into a career track that is increasingly less satisfying. The later one waits to make a later move, the more difficult it can be (which explains why so many people list "to change careers" as the reason for returning to school years later). True, experience from one industry is sometimes transportable into firms in a different industry. But the options can be limiting, and the biases of potential new employers can be difficult to overcome, as they will be inclined to choose people with experience in their own industry.

The easiest solution to this troublesome scenario is to follow your passions early, securing a job in the industry that interests you most, even if the job does not pay as well as some others. The rewards will come later, whereas switching later might be prohibitively expensive--it's much easier to take a low-paying job out of school than it is to take a low-paying job after working at a high-paying job and establishing a lifestyle at that pay level.

Thus, planning is not only important for increasing your odds of getting any job, but it's also important for getting the right job.

So okay, planning is important. But where does the plan come from? Where should you start?

The Secret: Set Goals

Do you currently have goals? Sure, everybody has some things they know they'd like to do at some point. But do you have REAL goals? A list of 5 or 10 things that you have committed yourself to doing? Things that you will do, in specific terms, by a specific date? Can you list them off the top of your head right now, as you read this?

If you said "no" to any part of the above questions, then your "goals" are probably more like "notions" than actual goals. Everyone has notions, and some people might even have some basic ideas about what they’d like to do after school. But how many college students actually set specific career-related goals and make a detailed plan about how they will accomplish their aims? How many students do you know who possess a written to-do list of steps that they will take between now and graduation that are designed to secure a great job?

If you don't have written goals that you can list off the top of your head, then you need to set some goals immediately.

Why set goals? Life is tremendously varied. At any given moment, there are thousands of things you could do. When you're driving, you could turn left, turn right, speed up, slam on the brakes, stop for lunch, stop for gas, decide to drive to Alaska to see what Kodiak bears look like, and on and on. But what is it that keeps you from ending up in Alaska every time you get into your car? Why don't you end up at random locations all the time? The answer is that you got into your car with a clear idea of where you wanted to go. You knew at the beginning.

Life is the same way. If you know at the beginning where you want to go, you'll probably get there. It's called having a vision. Even if detours and delays arise, eventually you will get there. But if you don't know where you're going, you probably end up someplace where you don’t want to be.

Consider, for instance, all the things you could do with your free time: you could read, eat, sleep, go for a run, go shopping, call someone, watch television, and so on, for an infinite number of options. How to choose? Even if you decide to spend an hour watching television, there are hundreds of channels you could surf through, not to mention your DVD collection. Or what about surfing the Web? Literally millions options are just a couple mouse-clicks away. It would be easy to fetter away a lifetime if we woke up each morning without any idea of what we were going to do, where we wanted to go, or how we were going to get there.

The human brain is very good at sifting through large amounts of information, searching for that which is most important in a given situation. It's also very good at answering questions that are posed to it. However, the brain does require that someone tell it what it's looking for or what question it's supposed to answer. In that way, it's like a powerful computer sitting on the desk—it's a
powerful tool, but somebody needs to tell it what to do.

That's exactly what goals do. By setting goals, you're giving your brain instructions for what it is supposed to be doing. Any time you have a decision to make, whether big or small, it's going to take your goal into account if you have bothered to tell it what your goal is. Sometimes your goal will not make any difference. For instance, if you're about to get hit by a car, your brain really doesn't care whether you'd like to get a job at a bank or in the entertainment industry; it's going to try to get you out of the way of the car. This is because your brain is, first and foremost, designed to keep you alive. In general, this means preventing you from experiencing pain. It's also design to help you experience pleasure, which is what makes us eat when we're hungry, sleep when we're tired, and even create kids, who hopefully get good jobs of their own after school so that they don't have to live with you into their 30s.

Brains are clever in that they avoid pain and seek pleasure, whether we tell them to or not. (They even get better at both of these as time goes by—it's called "learning.") The problem is that, if we don't tell our brain exactly which pain to avoid (and pleasure to seek), they'll go with whatever's most convenient, obvious, and quick.

When in doubt, about any decision, goals are what keep us on track with what's ultimately important—our long-term vision.

When you set a goal, and keep yourself reminded of it, the brain tends to ask the thousands of daily little unconscious questions in their proper context. The goal that you have set is what makes your brain ask the right questions, and come up with the best answers, all throughout the day.

In short, goals are what keep your brain making decisions with an emphasis on where you want to go, not this minute, but in the long run.

Are Goals Enough?

Goals, by themselves, are not enough. In fact, a goal, without a plan for how you intend to reach the goal, is little more than wishful thinking. As said above, the goal will help your brain decide between choices A and B. But a plan creates entirely new options—C, D, and E—for your brain to choose between, and then makes your path so clear that, half the time, your brain doesn't even need to make a choice, just as you don't need to make many conscious choices about which route to take when you are driving a familiar route, such as between home and work.

The goal is the "what." The plan is the "how."

The absolute best way to make any goal work is to sit down and make a plan.

Goals and Plans Are Nice, But What If I Don't Know What I Want?

Many students don't know exactly what they want to do when they leave school. Most people do, however, have a few general notions. If you're unsure of what your career goals are, the first thing to do is to simply spend some time thinking about it. First write down everything that you think you might be interested in doing. Go ahead and write down everything that comes to mind.

There are many different possible reasons, all valid, and ultimately your decision. Even if you don't know exactly what you want from college (or after college), you probably have some idea of what things are important to you, or that you might hope to get from the time spent at school.

Even if you don't yet know what you want, you still need goals.

If you're not sure what all of your options are, then set a goal right now entitled "To find out more about my career options." Give yourself a timeframe of 3-6 months, perhaps longer if you're a freshman, shorter if you're senior.
Once you've compiled a list of all the things you think you might like to explore while at college, the next step is to sort them by importance. You could rank them in descending order of importance, or put some number of stars from 1-5 next to each, depending on how important it is, etc. Whatever works best for you.

If you're like most people, you'll have a couple of things that you know you for sure want to do. Immediately set goals related to these!

Once you've compiled a list of all the things you think you might like to do upon graduating, the next step is to sort them by preference. If you're not dead set on a particular type of job or career, then this list might be long. That's okay; include anything that comes to mind. If you don't know enough about a job to sort it by preference, then sort them by interest level.

After the no-brainers (the ones that you know are interesting to you), you'll probably have a few items on the list that you think might be interesting, but you don't know enough about them to be certain. No problem. When you create a plan for your new, "To Find out More About My Career Options" your plan will end up comprising mostly a lot of fun tasks to gather information, such as, searching online, talking to people, attending introductory meetings, reading books and so on, until you know enough about the job to know whether you want to pursue it or take a pass. If you're pondering something big like choosing between two entire industries, then consider doing an internship in that industry to see if you like it. Paid internships are great (in essence, being paid to learn), but don't be afraid of unpaid internships if that's what's required to get your foot in the door. Whether it leads to a paying job later, or steers you away altogether because you discover you don't like the field, it will be well worth your time.

Is That All?

The people who rise to the heights of whatever career they choose will all tell you that college was just the **beginning** of their education. Landing your first post-college job is where the rubber hits the road and is, itself a huge accomplishment. But remember that it's really just the first step on a long and rewarding career path. In fact, the moment you get your first job, the next most important objective (goal) will probably be *to do well* at the job. And it never ends. There will be an on-going string of goals to accomplish on the job, new skills to acquire, and eventually new and better jobs as you advance in your career.

It's not only important that you continue setting goals throughout this process; it's actually the goals that make the process happen in the first place.

Remember,
1) always set new goals
2) re-visit them periodically,
3) update your plan, and
4) keep yourself reminded of the plan.

If you do these four simple things, you're virtually guaranteed to make continuous progress into any direction you choose.

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**Mission**
A statement about your purpose in life

**Vision**
A statement as to where and what you want to be doing in 5-10-15-20 years.

**Plan**
Tasks, deadlines, contacts, research, etc. needed to be accomplished to reach your vision.

**Goals**
Specific, achievable items to check off your plan as you proceed to the next goal to ultimately reach your vision.