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What To Do With An Indecisive New College Graduate

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DURHAM, N.H. -- As the strains of Pomp and Circumstance are heard across the nation this spring, hundreds of thousands of university graduates will celebrate the completion of their undergraduate degrees as joyous, teary-eyed parents look on. The day after commencement, however, could prompt another round of tears for parents when they learn their newly minted college graduates have no idea what they want to do with their lives.

What should parents of indecisive new college graduates do? Career and advising counselors say there's quite a bit they can do to help their children focus on moving forward after commencement instead of taking up a permanent spot on the couch in front of the television.

"Students don't need to figure out their entire life right after graduation, but, to reduce parental anxiety as well as their own anxiety, they should have some idea of the short-term plan (Plan B) while they work on figuring out their moderate and long-term career goals (Plan A)," says Louise Ewing, career advisor in the Advising and Career Center at the University of New Hampshire.

To get students working on Plans A and B, Ewing suggests the following for parents:

- Hold your student accountable.
- Help them break the process down into manageable steps.
- Get the student to seek help and guidance from school career offices.
- Have them take some financial responsibility for bills, etc. so their motivation to find a job increases.

While it may be tempting, parents should not do their children's job searches for them. And going with graduates to job interviews is a big no-no.

"We hear stories of parents going to the interviews with students and intervening in the job negotiation process, but that is actually robbing students of a learning opportunity. Being supportive is one thing; doing the work for them does them no good," says Bethany Cooper, manager of employer relations and recruiting in the UNH Advising and Career Center.

"Graduates need to make mistakes, learn from those mistakes, and take responsibility for creating a life for themselves that they will enjoy living. As hard as it is for parents to step back and watch this process and the occasional mistakes made, it's the best thing they can do for their child."

When starting a job search, many graduates erroneously believe that searching for and

obtaining their first job will be a snap. The ease of the Internet has convinced them that simply posting a resume on Monster.com will land them several offers from which to choose. As Cooper explains, they need to treat finding their first job like it was a class.

"Many students assume that there isn't much competition and the job search process will happen very quickly, resulting in a high-paying job. Some students also don't feel like they have to pay some 'dues' in their first job out of college. Others believe that the bachelors degree is enough, and don't realize that employers are assessing skills and experience developed in the course of getting the degree," Ewing says.

Searching for a job and career has always been a daunting process requiring that the individual actively market himself or herself, Ewing says, and it becomes even more difficult when the person doesn't know what he or she wants to do and which skills are appealing to an employer.

"Students today are not as well trained on appropriate professional communications, professional behavior and active follow-through. They are also facing much higher debt upon graduation, which can make it harder to just explore. Some students may have no choice but to take a position that pays well even if it's something they don't really like to do," she says.

However, graduates who take a job that may not be their ideal position can still volunteer, intern and join organizations that interest them. "This is much more productive than watching TV – they get experience, hone their interests, develop networking contacts, and develop skills that can go on a resume. It's a way to explore while still helping with the bills," Ewing says.

Directionless graduates also may think going to graduate school is a good alternative to searching for a job. Some fields require a master's degree, in which case, pursuing a graduate degree might be worthwhile since the new graduate still has a "student mindset." However, students with no work or internship experience in their desired field should test the waters first before enrolling in a graduate program. "Studying a topic is very different than working in that area. You might love the theory, but not the practice," Cooper says.

Those considering graduate school as a way to dodge entering the work force may want to reconsider their strategy. "For many students, school is comfortable. It is a known entity. The work world is frightening and unknown, but the only way to grow is to take risks. Instead of going to graduate school to put off getting a job, take the plunge and try out the professional world," Cooper says.

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A list of job-searching tips for graduates follows.

Job-Searching Tips for Graduates

- Break the process down into short-term, moderate-term and long-term career goals.

- Create a timeline for taking steps toward the goals.
- Seek out the support of other people who are searching for jobs.
- Visit career services for interest assessments, job search strategies, resume/cover letter writing, interviewing skills.
- Stay in contact with friends, make time for fun activities, constructively fill free time, explore and try different things through volunteer activities.
- Work out a budget.
- Be punctual for interviews.
- Do your research prior to the interview. If you get in there and the employer asks you "what do you know about us" and you do not have a researched answer, you will not likely get the job.
- Have questions prepared for the interviewer. You are interviewing them as well to make sure the position is right for you.
- Be prepared to talk about your skills and scenarios that showcase those skills. Anyone can say they are a "people person," but how can you prove it?
- Always follow up with a thank you note.
- Any communications you have with a potential employer matter, even when scheduling an interview with them via email. Use proper business email etiquette -- not the language used to Instant Message friends.
- Keep a job search log or spreadsheet. Note all the companies to which you are applying. Note the date you apply and your contact. Follow up one week after applying and note that as well. Eventually someone is going to call you back and you want to make sure you know who they are and what job they are calling about.
- Persistence, persistence, persistence. "I have heard more stories of students getting jobs only after contacting the employer 6+ times. The typical student does not bother doing that. The challenge is following-up politely and persistently, not in an annoying manner. A call or email every couple of weeks to let the employer know you are still interested is appropriate. This coupled with networking into that same employer via other avenues is key. Utilize alumni and other networks for informational interviewing to develop an internal champion," Cooper says.
- Cover letters should show passion. Do not use the same form cover letter for every company. You would not pass in the same research paper to all your professors.