

20 to-dos now to get a good job later

Get experience, play a sport, try to stretch a little

By Penelope Trunk | September 3, 2006

For those of you about to start another year at school, here's a list to keep in mind: Twenty things to do in college to set yourself up for a great job when you graduate.

1. Get out of the library. "You can have a degree and a huge GPA and not be ready for the workplace. A student should plan that college is four years of experience rather than 120 credits," says William Coplin, professor at Syracuse University and author of the book, "10 Things Employers Want You to Learn in College."

2. Start a business in your dorm room. It's cheap, Google and Yahoo are dying to buy your website, and it's better than washing dishes in the cafeteria. Note to those who play poker online until 4 a.m.: Gambling isn't a business. It's an addiction.

3. Don't take on debt that is too limiting. This is not a reference to online gambling, although it could be. This is about choosing a state school over a pricey private school. Almost everyone agrees you can get a great education at an inexpensive school. So in many cases the debt from a private school is more career-limiting than the lack of brand name on your diploma.

4. Get involved on campus. When it comes to career success, emotional intelligence -- social skills to read and lead others -- get you farther than knowledge or job competence, according to Tiziana Casciaro, professor at Harvard Business School. Julie Albert, a junior at Brandeis University, is the director of her a capella group and head of orientation this year. She hones her leadership skills outside the classroom, which is exactly where to do it.

5. Avoid grad school in the liberal arts. One in five English Phd's find stable university jobs, and the degree won't help outside the university: "Schooling only gives you the capacity to stand behind a cash register," says Thomas Benton, a columnist at the Chronicle of Higher Education (who has an English degree from Yale and a tenure-track teaching job.)

6. Skip the law-school track. Lawyers are the most depressed of all professionals. Stress itself does not make a job bad, says Alan Kreuger, economist at Princeton University. Not having control over one's work does make a bad job, though, and lawyers are always acting on behalf of someone else. Suicide is among the leading causes of premature death among lawyers.

7. Play a sport. People who play sports earn more money than couch potatoes, and women executives who played sports attribute much of their career success to their athletic experience, says Jennifer Cripsen of Sweet Briar College in Virginia. You don't need to be great at sports, you just need to be part of a team.

8. Separate your expectations from those of your parents. "Otherwise you wake up and realize you're not living your own life," says Alexandra Robbins, author of the popular new book "The Overachievers." (Note to parents: If you cringe as you read this list, then you need to read this book.)

9. Try new things that you're not good at. "Ditch the superstar mentality that if you don't reach the top, president, A+, editor in chief, then the efforts were worthless. It's important to learn to enjoy things without getting recognition," says Robbins.

10. Define success for yourself. "Society defines success very narrowly. Rather than defining success as financial gain or accolades, define it in terms of individual interests and personal happiness," says Robbins.

11. Make your job search a priority. Jobs do not fall in your lap, you have to chase them—especially a good one. It's a job to look for a job. Use spreadsheets to track your progress. And plan early. Goldman Sachs, for example, starts its information sessions in September.

12. Take a course in happiness. Happiness study is revolutionizing how we think of psychology, economics, and sociology. How to be happy is a science that 150 schools teach. Preview: Learn to be more optimistic. This class will show you how.

13. Take an acting course. The best actors are actually being their most authentic selves, says Lindy Amos of communications coaching firm TAI Resources. Amos teaches executives to communicate authentically so that people will listen and feel connected. You need to learn to do this, too, and you may as well start in college.

14. Learn to give a compliment. The best compliments are specific, so "good job" is not good, writes Lisa Laskow Lahey, psychologist at Harvard and co-author of "How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work." Practice on your professors. If you give a good compliment the recipient will think you're smarter: Big payoff in college, but bigger payoff in the work world.

15. Use the career center. These people are experts at positioning you in the workforce and their only job is to get you a job. How can you not love this place? If you find yourself thinking the people at your college's career center are idiots, it's probably a sign that you really, really don't know what you're doing.

16. Develop a strong sense of self by dissing colleges that reject you. Happy people have "a more durable sense of self and aren't as buffeted by outside events," writes Sonja Lyubomirsky of the University of California-Riverside. When bad things happen, don't take it personally. This is how the most successful business people bounce back quickly from setback.

17. Apply to Harvard as a transfer student. Sure people have wild success after going to an Ivy League school but this success is no more grand than that of the people who applied and got rejected. All people who apply to Ivy League schools seem to have similar high self-confidence and ambition, even if they don't get in, according to a study by Kreuger.

18. Get rid of your perfectionist streak. It is rewarded in college, but it leads to insane job stress and an inability to feel satisfied with your work. And for all of you still stuck on number 6, about ditching the law school applications: The Utah Bar Journal says that lawyers are disproportionately perfectionists.

19. Work your way through college. Getting involved in student organizations counts, and so does feeding children in Sierra Leone or sweeping floors in the chemistry building. Each experience you have can grow into something bigger. Albert was an orientation leader last year, and she turned that experience into a full-time summer job that morphed into a position managing 130 orientation leaders. A great bullet on the resume for a junior in college.

20. Make to do lists. You can't achieve dreams if you don't have a plan to get there.

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