

10 Tips for Parents of Prospective College Students

By Marcia B. Harris and Sharon L. Jones

1. Choosing a career/choosing a major

Security vs. adventure. Accountant, Peace Corps volunteer, journalist, college professor. Ultimately, your son or daughter should make the choice. Of course, you may want to mention factors to consider, such as job market demand, salary ranges, long-range opportunities, skills required, etc. Just because an occupation is "hot" now does not mean it will be equally in demand in 10 years or that your child has the aptitude or motivation for it.

2. Choosing to double major/choosing a major and minor

Most employers do not place a premium on a double major. It usually requires an extra one or two semesters to obtain a second major and does not particularly enhance a student's marketability. Exceptions would be a second major or a major and minor chosen for a specific career, such as English and chemistry for technical writing, or a health policy major and business minor for hospital administration. Of course, some students may choose to double major primarily for academic/intellectual purposes.

3. Grade point average (GPA)

Some students who get off to a rocky start eventually pull up their grades; however, this can be very difficult to do. Advanced placement credits and study abroad courses generally do not count in the computation of a student's GPA. Some employers use GPA cutoffs in considering applicants. Other employers stress the student's overall background: experience, number of hours worked during the school year to finance college, leadership activities, etc. Encourage your son or daughter to make academics a high priority beginning with his or her freshman year. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that it may take him or her a while to adjust to the rigorous academic demands of college.

4. Obtaining marketable skills

Most employers today put more emphasis on graduates' skills than on their academic majors. Encourage your son or daughter to develop strengths in at least two or three of the following areas:

- Computer skills (e.g., programming, word processing, spreadsheets, data base management, e-mail, Internet);
- Quantitative skills (e.g., accounting, statistics, economics);
- Communication skills (e.g., written and oral);
- Marketing/selling skills (e.g., sales, publicity, fundraising);
- Scientific skills (e.g., lab skills, scientific research);
- Foreign language skills (e.g., especially Spanish, Portuguese, Chinese, or Russian);
- Leadership skills (e.g., supervisory, extracurricular leadership roles, teamwork/team leader).

5. Leadership activities

Many employers rate leadership activities even more highly than GPA. Students who were very active in high school activities may be less involved in college extracurricular activities. However, employers regard high school as "ancient history" for a college senior. It is more valuable for a student to be involved in a few meaningful leadership roles on campus than to be in a "laundry list" of many campus clubs.

6. Experience

You may want your son or daughter to work in his or her hometown every summer. However, the experience gained as a lifeguard or ice cream shop counter clerk does not compare to that which comes from an internship (paid or unpaid) in the career field that he or she aspires to enter. Future employers will seek graduates with relevant, real-world work experience. Some students have little to write about on a resume if their summers were spent in school, traveling, or working at low-level jobs. We strongly suggest that students seek career-related experience for their sophomore and junior summers even if they must live away from home or accept an unpaid internship. Students needing financial support can combine an unpaid internship with a paid job such as waiter/waitress, etc.

7. Graduating early, graduating late

Some students graduate early through advanced placement credits, heavy course loads, and summer school courses. The advantages are lower educational expenses and the ability to start employment or graduate school earlier. The disadvantages may include the sacrifice of academic honors, work experience, and extracurricular and volunteer activities that may contribute to a student's maturity level and qualifications. Other students graduate late due to light course loads, academic difficulties, changing majors, poor academic advising, lack of direction, or reluctance to leave the cocoon of the college environment. Advantages to late graduation include the ability to improve grades with light class loads, extra time to change majors, the ability to take additional electives to improve marketability, and extra time to gain more career-related or leadership experience. Disadvantages to late graduation are increased college costs and possible disapproval of employers and graduate schools.

8. Planning for graduate/professional school

About 88 percent of the nation's college freshmen indicated in a recent survey that they plan to go to graduate or professional school, yet only about 24 percent do so within a year of completing their bachelor's degree. Students aspiring to graduate or professional school should: Be clear about the reasons they want to go on for further education; research the qualifications required for admission and be realistic about their chances of acceptance; and always have a "Plan B" or back-up plan in case they are not accepted. Students should discuss their interest in graduate or professional school well before their senior year with their academic adviser; the college's graduate or professional school adviser (e.g., the pre-law or pre-med adviser); and a college career adviser to obtain advice and guidance from three different perspectives.

9. Taking time off

Many students want to take time off after college graduation before attending graduate school or taking a career-related job. Future employers will want to know how the student has spent the intervening time. Do activities during this period demonstrate relevance to future career goals and/or a good work ethic? While short-term travel may be personally broadening, it does not increase a student's marketability to employers unless it is seen as career related. Therefore, the time off may result in a longer job search. For example, management trainee programs, which often begin shortly after graduation and hire large numbers of new graduates, may be filled by the time your child is ready to begin a job search.

10. Using the college career services office.

Students should visit the career services office no later than their sophomore year. Virtually all career offices provide individual career counseling/advising, career planning workshops, internship assistance, and career fairs and programs—these services are specifically for undergraduates. Your son or daughter should seek help early with choosing a career and preparing for it. Competition for good jobs, particularly in certain fields, is stiff. The career office can advise students about how to become a strong candidate for their field of interest.

Together, Harris and Jones wrote *The Parent's Crash Course in Career Planning: Helping Your College Student Succeed* (VGM Career Books, 2007, available from www.lulu.com) from which this list is adapted.

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