

WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO?:

CAREER PLANNING FOR PARENTS OF NEW POST-SECONDARY STUDENTS

By Dr. Deb Bartlette

SUPPORT EXPLORATION

Even though your children may be absolutely sure of what they want to do, studying new things may spark new interests.



TRY NOT TO WORRY

Don't panic if your child decides to major in philosophy or literature. While it takes a bit of planning, a liberal arts degree can lead to an excellent career. The campus Career Centre can help!



BALANCE SCHOOL & WORK

Encourage your children to get involved in extra-curricular and other activities. These are often very good ways to explore skills and abilities that may lead to a career, and build experience to put on a résumé. But remind them that these need to be balanced with their studies.

The summer of 2009 was a big one for me, as both my kids finished their post-secondary studies (at least for now) and launched themselves into the "real world." They're off to the races! One has embarked on what promises to be a successful career in a field she loves. The other has a highly desirable professional accreditation and a fine résumé full of related work experience and excellent references. As soon as the economy recovers a bit, he will be on his way.

This is, of course, the kind of outcome parents are hoping for. After all, no matter what our reasons for encouraging our children to seek a post-secondary education, in the end we want them to be able to make a living—preferably a decent one—doing something they find fulfilling. And maybe someday living on their own, even! But for them, getting from a post-secondary education to an entry-level career position (as opposed to a "McJob") is rarely a straightforward path, even when their parent just happens to be a career services professional!

Take our family, for example. My son was clearly destined to be an engineer from about the age of two. In some ways, his biggest issue was figuring out what kind of engineer and what program to attend (except for a period where he was obsessed with being a fighter pilot, until he found out that (a) doing rolls and spins in a Cessna made him airsick and (b) you have to be in the military to be a fighter pilot—and that means boot camp!).

My daughter was another story. She explored many options. After taking—and loving—auto mechanics, she wanted her own shop. A fabulous history teacher made her consider majoring in history. She finally settled on music and devoted herself to mastery of her instrument. But just as she was finishing her undergraduate degree, and thanks to picking the brains of the professionals she worked with while on gigs, she began to wonder if the lifestyle of the professional musician was for her. Yikes! What's a parent to do?

Actually, there is plenty that we parents can do to support our young adults in figuring out a career direction. Here are a few examples:

1

Support exploration! Even though your children may be absolutely sure of what they want to do, studying new things may spark new interests. And better to change majors or programs part-way through than to graduate and then work in a field that no longer interests them.

2

Affirm what you know to be skills and abilities your children have consistently demonstrated. Sometimes students overlook these and need to be reminded.

3

Talk with your children about courses and activities they are doing. What are they enjoying or not enjoying? Students often discover new things about themselves through their post-secondary experience. Your willingness to be a sounding board as they figure these things out will keep you in the loop.

4

Encourage your children to get involved in extra-curricular and other activities. These are often very good ways to explore skills and abilities that may lead to a career, and build experience to put on a résumé. But remind them that these need to be balanced with their studies.

5

Part-time work must also be carefully balanced. Yes, post-secondary is expensive, but studies show that too many hours of work not only negatively affects academic performance, but prevent students from getting involved in other valuable activities, many of which will do much more to build their résumés than several years of low-level part-time jobs.

6

Resist the temptation to pressure your children to “get through and get out.” Doing internships

or co-op work terms, or taking a semester or two off to work or study abroad, can be enriching experiences and highly valued by future employers. There is no prize for finishing in four years!

7

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8

Remember, it is their career and not yours. Yes, you may come from a long line of doctors, lawyers, teachers or whatever, but this may not be the best path for your child. Support them even if their choice is not your choice.

9

Encourage (strongly!) your children to take advantage of all the programs and services available to them. Co-ops, internships and practicum placements offer excellent opportunities to test out a career direction. While some of these may be unpaid, the experience, references and networking they can gain far outweigh the salary or lack thereof. Career Centres offer all kinds of workshops,

events, resources and mentoring (we do much more than help with résumés!) to assist students to build skills and experience to support their career development. And most of these are free!

My son took six years to finish his degree. However, he has nearly two full years of professional work experience and some great contacts in his chosen field—a real advantage over those hundreds of other new grads who have only a degree. My daughter finished her degree and didn't know what to do next. A bit of arm-twisting from Mom convinced her to try out a few things through unpaid internships. That led to a program in arts and cultural management, which also included several internships, and a full-time job awaiting her upon graduation. My work here is done, at least with my two students. Now, parents, it's onto yours! **CO**

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