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## How to Make the Most of Your College Career Center

Advisers can help burnish your resume, but also prepare you for interviews and share employment data.

By [Rebecca Koenig](#) , Staff Writer, March 12, 2018, at 9:54 a.m.



Career centers are designed to help students prepare for the working world. (iStockphoto)

As graduation day approaches, many college seniors feel the acute anxiety that can accompany job searching. They may be tempted to finally cross the threshold of a place they've long avoided: the university career center.

But career centers aren't in the business of job placement, says Ryan Willerton, associate vice president for career and professional development at the University of Notre Dame. You can't simply show up right before graduation and expect a career counselor to secure your dream job.

Instead, career centers are designed to help students gradually prepare for the working world over the course of several years. They teach students to discern their personal

strengths and interests, [communicate their skills](#) to potential employers via strong resumes and cover letters, [network effectively](#) and identify job opportunities.

Although advisers may try hard to advertise their services, it's ultimately up to students to learn about and take advantage of career center programs. Experts at American University, the University of Notre Dame and Mesa Community College, plus an Ernst & Young hiring manager who recruits on university campuses, spoke to U.S. News to offer their best advice for how to make the most out of the college career center.

### **Start Early, and Take Time to Reflect**

Freshman year is the best time for students to investigate what their career centers offer, because that gives them plenty of time to learn about various resources and opportunities.

It's very common for students to enter college undecided about what subjects they want to study or what jobs they want to pursue. Career advisers recommend students set aside time to think about their interests and develop a strategy for testing them.

"A lot of times students come to college thinking, 'I want to have a job where I make a lot of money, period, the end,'" says Kris Bliss, director of student services at Mesa Community College. "They're not thinking about, 'Is this my passion? Is this a field I want to stay in for the rest of my life?' Come in and talk with a career adviser, who will pose the question, 'Why are you choosing this field?'"

Taking a variety of courses in different disciplines during freshman and sophomore years can help students hone in on their interests. So, too, can working as an intern for different types of organizations. Career centers can help students find these internship opportunities. They also offer exercises such as personality and aptitude tests to help students with the discernment process. And some career centers organize field trips to company offices in industries such as finance, publishing and advertising.

Thinking early on about your interests and sampling different options may ultimately save you time and even tuition costs, Bliss says.

Students who don't pause to reflect may "pick a major, pick a plan and realize midstream it's not a career they want to pursue, then go back and take a whole new set of classes," she explains. "It delays them and it also costs them a lot of money."

**[See: [10 Jobs That Offer Millennials Good Work-Life Balance.](#)]**

### **Hone Soft Skills**

Reading, writing and arithmetic are important in the job market just like they are in the classroom. But building a thriving career also requires what hiring managers sometimes refer to as "emotional intelligence."

"We want foundational knowledge through college, but these life skills and soft skills are just as important as they navigate through their careers," says Natasha Stough, Americas director of campus recruiting at EY. The large accounting firm hires about 5,000 entry-level employees each year.

Clear [oral and written communication](#), sharp critical thinking and analytical reasoning, ethical decision-making, effective team collaboration and the ability to apply technology to solve problems are among the top skills employers look for in job candidates, says Gihan Fernando, executive director of the career center at American University.

His institution and many others offer programs to help students learn how to convey their soft skills to employers. Opportunities include resume and cover letter workshops, fashion shows that inform students [what to wear to work](#) and mock interviews, during which students practice telling anecdotes that demonstrate their emotional intelligence.

"Students benefit from really preparing for their job search," Stough says. "Being a knowledgeable, prepared candidate will help give somebody an edge going into the career fair or an interview with a firm."

### **Dig Into Data**

Career advisers are quick to explain that college majors don't translate neatly into specific careers; music majors can work as business consultants and accounting majors can find employment in journalism.

But many career centers track the jobs recent graduates secure after leaving campus, often breaking that information down by major or field of study. Perusing this data on the career center website, and talking about it with a counselor, can help students identify what they want to major in and what job opportunities might relate to their courses.

At Notre Dame, the career center tracks "[first destination](#)" outcomes, which include full-time employment, military service, graduate school or service programs such as the Peace Corps. The data for the class of 2016 reveals, for example, that 100 percent of students who majored in architecture found full-time jobs, while among history majors, 42 percent found jobs, 30 percent enrolled in graduate school, 19 percent took up service opportunities, 2 percent joined the military, 4 percent were seeking employment and 4 percent indicated the status of "other."

The data also shows median self-reported starting salaries by major. For computer engineers, the figure was \$72,000. For theology majors, it was \$40,000. Students who majored in Chinese reported a median starting salary of \$60,000.

**[See: [25 Best Jobs That Pay \\$100K.](#)]**

### **Understand Recruitment Cycles**

All industries handle entry-level hiring differently. Some corporations follow a regimented process: They hire students to [work as interns](#) during the summer after their junior year, then make formal offers in the fall of senior year to those interns whose performances were most impressive. In contrast, public schools often post their job openings in the late spring or early summer, so aspiring teachers may not know about career opportunities until after they graduate from college. And many other organizations hire throughout the year whenever there's a job vacancy.

It's important for college students to research the particulars regarding when and how the industries that interest them hire, Willerton says. Having that information can prevent some students from missing out on opportunities and others from panicking if their peers get job offers before they do.

Knowing about recruitment cycles can also help students plan when to participate in which career center programs. For example, students looking for summer internships may want to attend fall career fairs hosted by their universities. Students hoping to apply for jobs in the spring may want to participate in winter workshops designed to help them [practice for video, phone and in-person interviews](#).

**[See: [Don't Be That Guy \(or Gal\): 8 Networking Turn-Offs.](#)]**

#### **Look Beyond the Career Center**

Although career center counselors are experts, they don't have the exclusive on job wisdom. Professors may have helpful insight to share about working in their fields. Campus groups may host recruiters hoping to connect with students who have particular skills or who come from specific cultural backgrounds. And of course, peers from campus clubs, sports teams and Greek organizations often become important connections in the working world.

"Alumni like hiring from those organizations," Willerton says. "You can find career opportunities through those networks."

Tags: money, careers, Applying, colleges

**Rebecca Koenig** is the Careers reporter at U.S. News, where she covers employment, workplace culture and editorial content supporting Best Jobs. She previously worked as a reporter for The Chronicle of Philanthropy and The Chronicle of Higher Education, where she won the David W. Miller Award for Young Journalists, and as managing editor for Town & Style St. Louis Magazine. She studied English and history at the College of William & Mary. You can follow Rebecca on [Twitter](#) or email her at [rkoenig@usnews.com](mailto:rkoenig@usnews.com).