

POST-SECONDARY STUDENTS NEED HELP FINDING FULFILLING CAREERS

With Permission: Caroline Dickson and Kevin James [OP ED Vancouver Province online- Aug. 25-2018]

This fall, roughly 1.7 million students will arrive on post-secondary campuses across Canada. Unfortunately, many young people will sail through their entire undergraduate education only to find themselves feeling lost and without direction at the end of the voyage.

As college instructors, each with 10 years of teaching experience, we have taught thousands of students. This fall we will once again meet wide-eyed first years who admit to rarely speaking to parents or friends about career goals. We will encounter students who have selected a program of study because “it sounded good.”

Take, for example, Jesse, a 19-year-old accounting student who has no concept of what a career in accounting entails. He hasn't set foot in an accounting office and he has likely never spoken candidly to an accountant about careers in the field.

As part of our research into the topic, we surveyed a group of business students, and 45 per cent indicated that they do not have a clear plan following post-secondary graduation. Despite the efforts of high school guidance counsellors and campus career centres, we believe that Canada's post-secondary students are in urgent need of more direction and support.

In order to better understand our young adults, we conducted a career-planning workshop in Vancouver for high school and undergraduate students partway through their programs. Over the course of two days, we had candid discussions with students regarding their long-term plans.

We confirmed that most students found the prospect of career planning to be overwhelming. They don't know where to start. And most of the parents who participated in the discussion were not entirely certain how to support their kids.

The result is that many young people are unsuccessful in finding a clear career direction even four years into their post-secondary experience. We recently crossed paths with a student named Michelle, a 22-year-old about to complete a Bachelor of Arts. When we asked her about her plans after graduation, she seemed stumped by the question. She mentioned that “philanthropy” might be a possibility, but it was clear that she did not have an idea of how to enter the field.

Michelle is not alone. In a 2015 report on career decision-making patterns of Canadian youth, Statistics Canada reported that for the majority of young adults, the process of identifying and narrowing career plans lasts well into adulthood. We see strong supporting evidence of this trend in discussions with our students.

Why is it that some students seem so unprepared for life after post-secondary study and their parents can't seem to find ways to help? One possible answer is that society's expectations of the education system tend to be unrealistically high. A credential from a post-secondary institution is no longer a sure-fire guarantee for a successful career and life.

As instructors, we provide our students with three pieces of career advice to get them pointed in the right direction:

First, we encourage students to take time to think seriously about their interests, abilities and possible related careers.

Second, we counsel students to gain practical life experience by volunteering and getting involved in co-operative education programs and career-related extra-curricular activities.

Third, we suggest that young adults talk openly about careers with family members and friends.

Self-reflection may not come naturally to some young adults. But making a detailed list of personal strengths and interests can be a first step. When it comes to imagining possible career paths, there are helpful online resources. One example, the Government of Canada Job Bank (www.jobbank.gc.ca), is an excellent starting point for researching potential careers.

In terms of practical life experience, students and their parents can sometimes overlook the very real value of working and volunteering during the undergraduate years. The Canadian University Consortium concluded in a recent study that almost half of today's post-secondary population does not participate in co-ops, internships and volunteer opportunities.

These activities are opportunities to develop important "soft skills" — the ability to communicate effectively and work well with others. These skills are highly valued by employers, according to a 2016 Business Council of Canada study.

Ultimately, we believe that the work of preparing young adults for their future careers needs to start in our homes. Families and friends can encourage students to take the time to think seriously about their interests, abilities and possible careers. The bottom line is that we need to help the younger generation by speaking with them and connecting them to people in the community who can help them understand possible career options.

The post-secondary years are truly about mapping out a course for uncharted waters in years to come. Instead of feeling rudderless and without direction, wouldn't it be wonderful if young adults felt that they were on the greatest adventure of their lives? Which, of course, they are.

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