

Viewpoint: How to make your college days count

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A few simple steps and employers may be ringing sooner than you think

Every year millions of students leave home for the first time, bound for various institutes of higher learning. They hope to benefit from a generations old formula - good grades at a good school equals a good job.

If you're one of these students, you should know that class work isn't the only, or even the most important, thing about university life. In three or four years, employers will be looking at much more than your grades. Remember, your results might get you the interview, but they won't get you the job.

Fortunately, there are several simple things you can start doing today which will improve your prospects after graduation.

Interviewers won't care how you solved a textbook problem that 200 other students solve each year. They will be much more interested in how you handled a nasty surprise at the end of a difficult project, when you had no time and no money.

To get that kind of experience, you need to get out of the classroom and into labs and research projects. That means late nights and long weekends, but it pays off in valuable experience and good stories.

Measuring your value

Hiring is difficult and firing is painful, so companies are understandably reluctant to take a chance on a new graduate. However, they will hire you if they already know what you can do. That means internships, summer jobs and work-study.

Five steps to success

- Get out of classroom and into research projects
- Internships and summer jobs are vital for experience and contacts
- Study a foreign language or go abroad for a year
- Learn to communicate your ideas clearly
- Enjoy what you do

"It's not what you know. It's who you know," might not seem fair, but it makes sense from the company's point of view. Take advantage of it.

As fast as the world is changing, it's unlikely you'll spend your entire career in one field. So it's wise to build skills which will serve you wherever you go.

Studying another language or taking a year abroad is always a good idea. Your value in the market is partially determined by the size of the market, so the more people you can work with, the more valuable you will be.

If your school has the right kind of economics department, spend a term or two there. Look for one which emphasises incentives, unintended consequences and a dynamic view of the world. These habits of thought will help you spot opportunities others may miss.

If your department only teaches equilibrium models and macro aggregates like GDP, skip it. Those things will turn you into a Keynesian, at which point I reckon you'll be ruined for life.

Learn to speak and write well. People who can communicate their ideas clearly and with confidence have a great advantage, regardless of how good their ideas are.

Finally, take time to enjoy yourself. That might sound like a lot to ask but it really shouldn't be that hard. If you're doing it right all those labs and projects should be fun.

Working on hard problems with smart people is rewarding by itself, even if it does mean losing a lot of sleep. Besides, you've got 40 years of long hours, back-to-back meetings and taking work on vacation in front of you. You might as well learn to enjoy yourself now.

Make the grade, prove your mettle, build a network, learn the ways of the world and the people in it. It's a lot to pack into a few short years and those years will pass much faster than you can imagine.

But if you keep these goals in mind and have a plan you're willing to stick to or throw out the window, as opportunities present themselves, you'll do well.