

Getting Started with Job Hunting for College Students

By Rachel Lane, Contributor

Last Updated: Sep 04, 2024



Starting early is a huge benefit—the earlier you begin thinking about your career, the more time you have to utilize all the resources available to you in college!

Resources are all around you; professors, career fairs, career service centers, friends, and colleagues are all great tools to help you in your career preparation!

Whether you're a sophomore or a senior, it's never too early to start thinking about life after college, specifically what job you're going to have! Job hunting can be a challenging and stressful time, but you can mitigate a lot of the difficulties by starting to prepare for job hunting as soon as possible. We've developed this guide to provide you with information you need to prepare to enter the job market!

1. Start Thinking Early

One of the best things you can do to prepare for job hunting is to start thinking about it early.

Once you declare a major or even just narrow it down to what majors you may be interested in, begin looking into the job opportunities for that/those major(s). Are there jobs that seem more appealing to you than others? Even as early as freshman year, it will be useful to keep those in the back of your brain. Remember, the early bird gets the worm (or in this case, job!)

Talk to Professors and the Career Services Office

As you get to know your professors, start talking to them about jobs that might be a good fit for you. If you've had the same professor for a couple of classes, chances are that the professor knows you pretty well and could help advise you on what occupation might be a good fit. In addition to making career suggestions, professors can advise you on classes that might be beneficial for you to take, such as a specific foreign language or a niche elective.

Another great resource on college campuses is the career services office at your college. Your career services office will likely have connections you don't have and will have an overall better understanding of the alumni network, industry connections, job trends, and so forth.

Look into Internships and Other Opportunities

It's advisable that by the end of your sophomore year, you might start thinking seriously about what job you would like after college, and start looking into ways to tailor your experiences with that goal in mind. The beginning of junior year is a great time to investigate internship opportunities for the summer between junior and senior year. Internships are a great way to test a career, earn extra money or college credit, or potentially set you up for post-grad employment at that organization.

The reason it's recommended to wait until your junior year is that while some companies are willing to hire underclassmen, many internships are reserved for juniors and seniors. However, if you have a good idea of what you want to do, and want to start interning as a sophomore, it's definitely worth looking into.

Also, don't forget the opportunities available to you through your college. Sometimes universities will pay for you to study abroad, offer credit for local internships during the academic year, or provide incentives to take professional exams. For example, some colleges will offer exam fee reimbursement for professional or educational exams such as actuarial exams, the LSAT, or the GRE.

2. Use Your Resources

While it's great to be independent, it is important to reach out to others as much as possible when job hunting. Drawing on connections can ultimately help open the door and opportunities not readily available.

Connect with Professors and Alumni

A great place to begin building your network is by asking your professors if they can connect you to others in the industry.

Since you'll be asking professors in your major, they'll be familiar with your prospective career field and may be able to connect you with alumni who followed a similar path.

Similarly, see if you can get into contact with alumni from your college who have the career that you want. Either the career services office or a quick internet search should be able to put you in contact with relevant alumni. Just

of the time, alumni are very willing to assist, as they want to see other individuals who attended their college succeed. Many are even willing to be long-term mentors, and connect you to their network as well.

Finally, if you land a great internship, make sure you do your best work at that internship, as it could turn into a full-time job after graduation. Many companies use summer internships as a prolonged job interview to vet potential entry-level employees, and even if your company doesn't do that explicitly, doing a great job will give you a leg up when it comes to applying for positions at that company. Even if you do not end up applying to that organization after graduation, doing quality work can produce network connections and letters of recommendation from that company.

Look into Job Fairs and Professional Organizations

Take advantage of all the job fairs at your college even if they are not in your field. It can't hurt to peruse all options available to you. Plus, job fairs are a great way to make connections that you may be able to draw upon later in your job hunting process.

Another great resource is electronic job listings and other resources from professional organizations. Even if you're not ready to apply yet, a good step could be connecting with people in a professional organization, and reaching out for an informational phone call with someone at a company or a job you're interested in to learn what could help you land a job in the future.

Don't Forget a Great Cover Letter/Resume

Finally, start working on application and interview prep by writing a cover letter and resume and practicing mock interviews. Your career services o

most likely has employees who will vet your resume and cover letter for free. You could also solicit the help of your friends too, especially if you have friends who are strong professional writers or are particularly business savvy. Friends who are strong writers will help catch all those pesky grammatical errors, and the business people will likely have expertise about what companies are looking for. Also, if you know anyone—maybe your parents or a family friend—who has had to hire people before, such individuals can help inform you on specific interview questions to prepare for, and what to put on a resume/cover letter.

3. Distinguish Yourself in College

Once you land your first job after college, college extracurriculars and acclaims won't matter as much. However, in order to get that first job, you'll want an outstanding college record, so take full advantage of all the opportunities available to you.

Apply for Awards and Honors

It's important to apply for all the awards that you can in college. Your college likely has a ton of awards available for all areas of study, so see if you're qualified to receive any of those. You may also consider looking into outside awards. There are a variety of essay contests available for a wide spectrum of majors where you might be able to earn anywhere from \$250 up to \$5,000. Plus, it would look great on a resume.

Another college-related honor is graduating with honors in your major, so ask your professors about what you need to qualify for this. Additionally, check out

the bulletin boards in your department for opportunities available to you and regularly ask your professors. Make the most of your time as a college student!

Make Yourself Extra Marketable

You might also look into conferences for your career field and/or major and at least try to attend one—students typically get discounts—or see if you can present a paper or a poster at a conference. You would be able to put the presentation on your resume, which shows great professional knowledge, networking experience, and presentation skills to a future employer.

Finally, look into other ways you can prepare for the job market. Non-academic achievements like becoming Microsoft Office certified or teaching yourself another language can set you apart from the crowd. The more you do as a college student, the easier it will be to land a great job after graduation.

4. Be Realistic

In general, so many amazing things could (and do) happen, but be sure to balance your idealism with some realism. You're likely excited about not having to live on a college student income anymore, but don't expect to have a six-digit salary at your dream organization right out of college. It could happen, but probably not, so it's better to plan for the worst, and hope for the best than the other way around!

Know Your Career Goals (Even 5/10 Years Out!)

Be sure that you know what your career goals are so that you'll be able to assess whether an offer is going to be a good fit for you. You might want or need a particular salary range to help pay off your student loans in a specific tim

frame. Similarly, location may be important to you if you prioritize specific destinations, proximity to family, or relevancy to network ties. Perhaps you're willing to take a slightly lower salary if the benefits are better, it's your ideal job, or you have the opportunity for upward mobility. Whatever your career goals, just make sure that you know what they are before the job offers come around.

This forward-thinking will also help you prepare to explain your 5/10 year goals in an interview. The clearer your vision, the more you will set yourself apart from others. Many individuals nearing graduation don't have a very good idea of what they would like to do long term, but if you do, that will help differentiate you from the applicant pool.

Don't Stop Growing in Your Career

Make sure you know what you need to do to grow professionally, and do it! It's important to not stay stagnant and to keep looking into opportunities that will make you not just a better employee at your office, but also in the general career field.

Finally, remember the age-old job search advice. You might feel discouraged trying to get a job with little to no experience, but hang in there! Those who are motivated and hopeful keep knocking until a door opens. Job searching is never easy, but taking the proper preparation steps while you're still in school can help make it easier!