Develop Your Career Goals Holistically

By: Melanie Buford

Many undergraduate students start the career decision-making process by selecting a major based on the subjects they enjoyed in high school. For example, you may have chosen to major in engineering because you were "smart" in high school or strong in math and science, but you really don't know much about the engineering field. And then, you wonder why you're not more interested in the engineering coursework and field experiences.

The problem isn't engineering. The problem is that you've formed career goals in isolation. You didn't consider the environment you would be working in, the physical location of the organization you might work for, the skills you want to develop and build on, or the way you hope to grow a professional.

Dan Blank, a career coach who works primarily with creative professionals, offers the following advice in his webinar "Take Back Your Creative Life."

"Career goals should not be formed in isolation. You must take into account all of your responsibilities (personal and professional), and be sure to account for your own well-being. This includes physical and mental health." Blank encourages his clients to integrate their career and personal goals in order to set themselves up for success.

Career goals, increasingly, need to be formed holistically. Gone are the days when choosing a career was simply a matter of matching your best school subject to an industry. The market is volatile; new opportunities are being created and other avenues are becoming less viable. A law career isn't the safe choice it once was, and the nonprofit world has expanded to include diverse organizations tackling new social issues. It's more common that professionals will relocate to a new city for a job opportunity, and more workers than ever are changing jobs and moving to new sectors over the course of their careers.

Students are facing the so-called "paradox of choice." Research has demonstrated that if you are presented with more opportunities, decision making becomes more difficult and satisfaction less likely.

When you step into a career development office today, you're faced with a much broader set of options than you would have been 30 years ago. You could go to medical school in your hometown or spend two years in the Peace Corps and teach grade school students in Lithuania. You could go to graduate school for computer science or launch a start-up with friends based on ideas for a new app.

In order to make these decisions, you must consider not only what talents you have, but what kind of life you want to lead.

Here are a few questions you should consider during the career exploration process:

- What skills do I have and want to develop?

- What type of work environment might best fit my temperament?

- What type of diversity do I hope to have in my work environment?

- How is the industry I'm considering expected to evolve in the next few decades?

- What city, state, or country might I want to live in?

- What have my career goals been and how have they changed?

- What role would I like technology to play in my career?

- How important is stability to me and how willing am I to take risks?

Each of these questions will take time to answer as you develop more clarity in your identity and values. Attempting to build your life looking only through a narrow lens of career is bound to work against your happiness. Look into internship and co-op programs that allow you to get full-time work experience before graduation so you can test your interests in specific careers.

Melanie Buford is a writer and career counselor who has lived and worked on both American coasts and abroad. She is the program coordinator and an adjunct instructor at the University of Cincinnati. Melanie writes both fiction and non-fiction, and is in the process of developing a 70,000-word fictional novel.

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