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Starting college? Here's how to graduate with a job.



(Illustration by Dan Page)

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If you're heading off to college this fall, all sorts of people have the same advice for you. Your former teachers, your parents' friends, [the Wall Street Journal](#): They all want to help you get a job when you graduate, and they want you to earn enough out

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of the gate to make a big dent in your student loans, which means they're all nudging you to study engineering, math or computer science.

By many measures this is wise. American business leaders and federal lawmakers are always talking about how the economy needs more hard-science majors. The job market reflects this. Let's use [statistics compiled by the Labor Department](#), because they're probably more comprehensive than whatever numbers your folks' old college roommates have on hand:

The average starting salary for an engineering major last year was \$62,655, tops among the eight categories of majors tracked in the study. In 2009, at the end of the Great Recession, the unemployment rate for math and computer science grads a year removed from earning their degrees was 6 percent — half the rate for humanities or social science majors.

So that's the secret? Simple as that? Major in math or science, graduate, walk right into a good gig?

For most of you, no.

Crowds of students start their college careers with the intent to earn a so-called STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) degree. A lot of them never make it. New research from a pair of economists from Berea College in Kentucky and the University of Western Ontario suggests that fewer than half of the students who start out as science majors end up earning a science

degree.

The economists chalk this up to students' "misperceptions about their ability to perform well academically in science." Translation: STEM classes are challenging, perhaps especially so for students less interested in the subject matter than in chasing a lucrative degree.

As an economics reporter, I feel compelled to say that if you're interested in math or science or engineering or computers, and you have the aptitude for the coursework, then, please, for the love of GDP, give a STEM major a shot. The economy needs more math and science grads to drive the big innovations that will help America prosper.

As a former political-science major, I'm happy to tell everyone who doesn't fall into that camp that there's hope for you in the job market, too. But you'll have a much better chance if you start thinking now about how to use your time in school to hone skills that will improve your employability — no matter what your major.

Consider this your step-by-step guide to making your college

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career work for getting you work, with the help of career counselors, academic research and a trove of economic data.

Step 1: Start thinking during orientation about finding a job.

Your first days on campus are a great time to find your way around, buy your books and meet people who may well become your best friends for life. They're not a time most students start thinking about graduation and the job hunt waiting on the other side. But several college career counselors say the sooner you turn your mind toward the work world, and what you'll need to do to succeed in it, the better.

The first step is something you'll probably do a lot of your freshman year, anyway: introspection. Spend some serious time thinking about how you're wired, what you enjoy and what sorts of jobs might allow you to follow your interests and get paid in the process.

"The general advice we give students is, first and foremost, look at themselves," says Lorie Logan-Bennett, director of the career center at Towson University in Maryland. Her team asks students: What are you good at? What are your values? "The earlier they can start thinking about it and start taking some action that would be targeted and focused, the better," she says.



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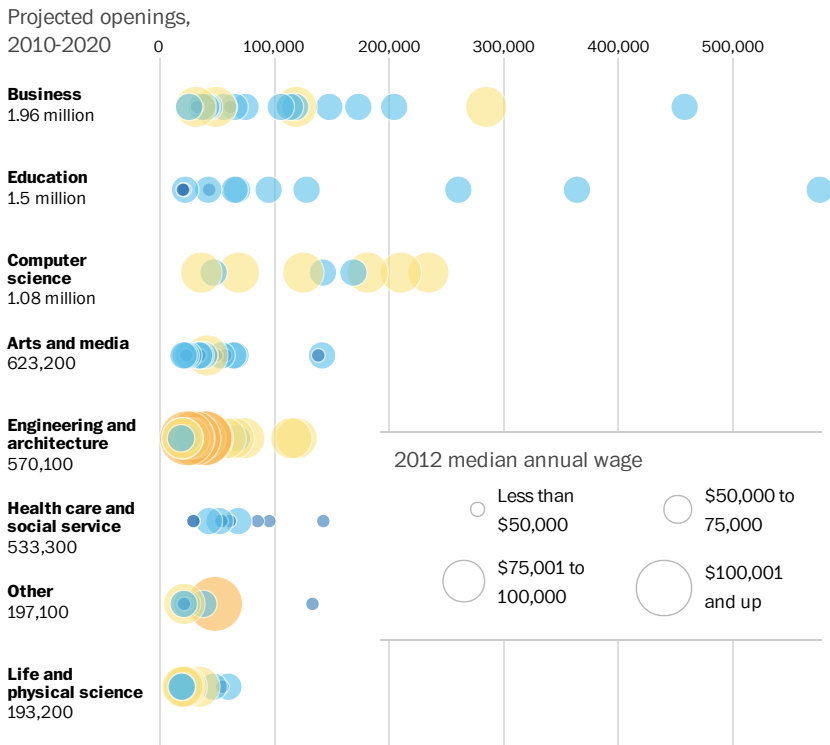
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How to get a job after college

It's impossible to predict which jobs, exactly, will be coming open when this year's freshmen graduate into the workforce. But the Labor Department ventures a guess. It has predicted openings over the next 10 years. Here are how 118 jobs stack up:



SOURCE: Bureau of Labor Statistics College to Career report. GRAPHIC: Darla Cameron - The Washington Post. Published Aug. 9, 2013.

Step 2: Don't pick a job yet.

That seems contradictory, but it's not. With rare exceptions, such as aspiring doctors, you probably shouldn't lock yourself into a narrow career path early on at a four-year school.

(Note to community college enrollees: The reverse might be true for you. You could save yourself money and maximize your future earnings by asking pointed questions very early about what degree or certificate you plan to pursue; how likely it is that you'll complete that degree, given your academic record; and what sort of job prospects await grads in that field.)

For four-year students, your self-exploration is likely to take a while and could include changing your major at least once. Also, your future job market is bound to change while you're in college.

Washington and Lee University in Virginia keeps detailed records on what jobs its graduates end up in six months after they leave school. Those records show volatility in opportunities for recent graduates. In 2003, nearly 10 percent took a job in consulting. About 16 percent went into education. In 2007 the share of consultants fell to half the 2003 level; educators fell, too. Finance jobs were the big gains. By 2011, finance had retreated, and education fell again, but consultants were making a modest comeback.

"The jobs that are there today may not even be around in four years or six years when the next group of college students come around," says Beverly Lorig, Washington and Lee's director of career services. "I would be very careful against advising students to make a major choice or a career choice when they start their college career."

Andy Chan is the vice president for personal and career development at Wake Forest University in North Carolina and a pioneer in a new wave of thinking about college career counseling. His approach focuses less on steering students to jobs and more for preparing them for what employers will need. "I teach students not to think about industries first," Chan says. "I teach them to think about skills and functions."

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Airborne82 wrote:

8/9/2013 7:50 PM EDT

Add to step 5: get in with a good company by doing the dirty jobs, install cabling, bend conduit, write and research, become an apprentice, and even dig ditches if necessary. When you start at the bottom there's no place to go but up; so long as you can limit partying hardy every night while enjoying your youth:)

KGBlankinship responds:



8/11/2013 9:00 AM EDT

I happen to be an engineer. This is not how it's done in the corporate world. You're out of touch.



KGBBlankinship responds:
8/11/2013 9:12 AM EDT

This is the reality:

- (1) Never miss a schedule deadline.
- (2) Get in good socially with your peers.
- (3) Work extremely hard, putting in lots of overtime for free, to gain a competitive edge and 'wow' the management.
- (4) The boss is always right and one must be loyal even if he's wrong.

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