

## Following A Career Path: A Four Year Journey

Traditional students enter college with an idea that their career considerations are best left to the senior year of college, or maybe the last semester of their junior year. Yet students wouldn't wait until their senior year to learn how to use the library or develop the necessary skills to write a research paper. Freshman year is the perfect time for students to start taking confident steps along a clear career path.

All experiences in college can translate to resume-worthy experience for future employers to consider. Students should focus especially on these four things employers and graduate schools look for: **academic connection, campus and community involvement, basic work experience, and self-identified skills.**

1. The **academic connection** is the central and most important piece of a college experience. However, **academic connection** means much more than a good grade point average. It should include:

- ◆ Establishing productive relationships with **faculty**, especially as freshmen
- ◆ Participating in **active learning** opportunities, such as lab courses, group projects, and class
- ◆ **Study abroad**, and develop cultural competency
- ◆ Active **learning groups**, to foster collaborative learning and teaching techniques
- ◆ **Experience-based learning**, or *experiential education*: internships, cooperative education, practicums, clinicals, student teaching, etc
- ◆ Joining **professional organizations and clubs** related to major, career direction, or personal interests

2. **Campus and community involvement** fosters skill development and offers important work-skills through philanthropy, service, hobbies and interests. These opportunities allow students to develop valuable abilities in teamwork, communication, problem solving, events planning, budgeting, management, creativity, priority setting, and process improvement. These activities encourage leadership, through accomplishing people-oriented goals.

3. Good **basic work experience** is anything but basic. When basic work experience involves a job related to their major, it impacts not only academics, but leadership skills and future employment potential, as well. Customer service positions or work-study jobs help develop important skills, such as professional, solution-focused communication, conflict resolution, phone etiquette, multi-tasking and flexibility.

4. Finally, employers and graduate schools value a student's **self-identified skills**. Most industries and professions require skills, attributes and behaviors that are specific to their niche, but that may also apply to a wide spectrum of careers. Through challenging college coursework and involvement, students gain the ability to identify and speak confidently about the skills that will be of value to their chosen profession.

Freshman year is the ideal time to seek out **academic connection, campus and community involvement, basic work experience, and self-identified skills**. However, it is never too late in the college process for a student to begin making confident steps along a career path. Academic advisors, department chairs and Career Services staff are always eager to meet with students to help them chart their course and process their college experiences for maximum benefit.

*By Gene Wells, Director of Career Services and Cooperative Education*