

## **The Future Is Now: How Your First Year in College May Shape Your Life**

**By: Michael Despeaux**

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As a first-year student, you'll hear much about what you should be doing to make the most of college. Choosing a major that interests you, building a circle of new friends and meeting people different from yourself, joining student organizations, gaining effective college study habits, and even becoming an independent learner – these should be typical goals for new students. Because you have a full college experience to anticipate, you have the chance to craft a Western Carolina experience that will change your life.

During this recession, what college can do for you may seem especially important. It should. In the news, and in the experience of many North Carolina families, you don't have to look far to find reasons for concern. More than ever before, a simple credential in the form of a college degree, by itself, does not guarantee career success or personal prosperity. A May 18 New York Times article presents evidence that concludes "even for college graduates – the people who were most protected from the slings and arrows of recession – the outlook is rather bleak." Your parents' generation, with good reason, saw college as a way to improve their lives and to achieve upward mobility. Due to changes in our economic landscape, while for you this outcome may be possible, it certainly is no longer automatic. A recent Rutgers study reports, "Just 17 percent of recent college graduates expect to do better than the previous generation."<sup>2</sup>

Does any of this mean that you shouldn't go to college? Does it imply that Western Carolina won't positively impact your life and increase your chances of enjoying a meaningful and productive career? The answer to both questions is simple – no. Western Carolina offers you the chance to climb high. But putting one foot in front of the other is up to you.

You have reached a remarkable moment in your life. You are uniquely positioned to establish patterns, set goals, and build stepping-stones that will help you achieve success in the days and years after you graduate. Instead of traveling a path of lesser resistance and addressing each career step only when it becomes urgent, I urge you to begin now, during your first year of college.

What can you do? It's helpful to take a look at the things that many of today's graduates wish they'd done. It turns out, despite facing challenges upon graduation, most of them are glad they went to the college they chose. In "Unfulfilled Expectations: Recent College Graduates Struggle in a Troubled Economy," the authors discover that most regrets centered around what students did (or didn't do) while they were there:

**WHAT STUDENTS WOULD HAVE DONE DIFFERENTLY TO BE SUCCESSFUL IN TODAY'S LABOR MARKET/WORKPLACE**

**(BAR GRAPH)**

Jessica Godofsky MPP, Cliff Zukin PhD, Carl Van Horn PhD, May 2011. "Unfulfilled Expectations: Recent College Graduates Struggle in a Troubled Economy." In *Worktrends: Americans' attitude about work, employers, and government*. Rutgers University, NJ. Page 18

According to the study, graduates wish they had made more careful choices, gained more integrated experiences, and practiced job search skills earlier. When I speak to first-year classes, I usually discuss these very things that students should be doing to develop their career paths. I always talk about the importance of choosing a major that not only excites you but also matches your interests, abilities, and

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[http://www.wcu.edu/WebFiles/PDFs/October\\_Career\\_Journal.2011.pdf](http://www.wcu.edu/WebFiles/PDFs/October_Career_Journal.2011.pdf)

values. Career Services offers counseling, career tests, and lots of information that can help you make informed decisions.

Career Services also helps students identify and pursue meaningful real-world experiences, starting with on-campus employment but ranging from related service or campus involvement to internships and job shadowing opportunities. More than ever, it is critical that you gain experience during college, find ways to apply your knowledge, and develop skills that will make you more competitive when you graduate. In recent years and in the new economy, students who fail to integrate their academic, co-curricular, and work experiences, demonstrating that they have workplace skills, are at an instant disadvantage. An article in the Chronicle of Higher Education about internships states that they “used to be optional, an added bonus. But for many of today’s over programmed college students, it has become a critical career move – and a rite of passage.”

Career Services also provides assistance to students through every stage of any job search. Whether you’re competing for an internship or readying for full-time employment, we’re here to help. During your very first year, I recommend that you go ahead and seek our assistance preparing your résumé. Consider practicing your career related communication skills by using your webcam to interact with the Perfect Interview online program – the questions will actually help you identify skills and experiences you’ll want to develop during the next three years. Attend a job fair and meet real employers – ask them what you need to do to become an exceptionally qualified candidate for a job at their organizations. Go to an etiquette event and learn how to create strong first impressions in a social or networking setting. In short, take advantage of our services, and do it now. Don’t wait until the last minute.

Among the students I see, the ones who prevail, in any economy, are those who meet two criteria. First, they are purposeful. They thoroughly examine their interests and research majors and related career fields. They make choices based on self-knowledge and identify four-year paths toward their goals. Second, they achieve excellence. Excellence begins in the classroom, but it extends to job or internship settings, leadership and service roles, and character. Even in a tight market, there is always room for excellence.

Career Services stands by to help you succeed at Western Carolina. The rest is up to you, and, as first-year students, you have time and opportunity on your side.

1. Catherine Rampell, “Many with New College Degree Find the Job Market Humbling,” May 18, 2011, New York Times.
2. Jessica Godofsky MPP, Cliff Zukin PhD, Carl Van Horn PhD, May 2011. “Unfulfilled Expectations: Recent College Graduates Struggle in a Troubled Economy.” In *Worktrends: Americans’ attitude about work, employers, and government*. Rutgers University, N.J.
3. Sara Lipka, “Subsidizing the Internship,” July 18, 2008, The Chronicle of Higher Education.