

Real-Life Experiences Help You Test-Drive Your Dream Job

By Brian Kurth

There is a big difference between *thinking* you will like a profession and knowing it.

But how do you reach that level of certainty? Real-life experiences in a field can be the best teacher when searching for the right career path. Experiences like job shadowing, informational interviews, internships and working with a mentor can offer practical, hands-on experience learned outside of the classroom. In fact, augmenting formal education with one or more of these real-life experiences can make the college experience much richer and complement the investment of time and money made in a college education.

Linda Scales, director of career services at the University of San Diego, says experiences like internships and job shadows can be the most clarifying experience of a student's college career.

In some instances, students find they are barking up the wrong tree and change majors entirely. Scales offers the example of students studying to become teachers. Once they start student teaching, a terrifying realization can take hold.

“It's the trauma of ‘Oh, I really don't like being in the classroom, then spending all night on lesson plans. What am I going to do with my life?’ It's horrible to watch and it's horrible to go through, but it's certainly a valuable time to learn before you're out there and you've got the degree. It's a greater challenge switching careers when you're out in the world supporting yourself.”

Some students learn a more nuanced lesson. They may realize they are on the right career path but discover they want to work at a certain size company or in a particular environment. These little lessons, Scales says, can have a huge impact on a student's happiness after graduation.

There are many ways to learn these lessons, beyond the traditional semester-long internship. There are several steps any student can take to delve deeper into their dream career.

Research – Learn as much as you can about your dream career and the people and organizations most successful in the field. Find out what values are associated with that career and whether they are in line with your values. What is the lifestyle of people in this field of work like? What is the work like on a day-to-day basis?

Find a mentor – When looking for a mentor, look for a person who has a strong passion for their work. A mentor is ideally someone with expertise in the field and an ability to teach. This should be a person who has longevity in the field and, most important of all, someone with whom you feel a sense of connection.

Spend some time – The only way to truly discover if a job is your dream job is to spend some time doing it! Arrange to spend time with your mentor, ask lots of questions and pay attention to how you respond to your experience. Do you feel like you **should be** enjoying the experience or are you genuinely thrilled by the work?

Investing time in test-driving a dream job during college allows a student time to set a new course well before graduation comes. By spending the energy now, it increases the chances that the first job out of college really will be a dream job!

Brian Kurth, a former “Dilbert”, worked for the phone company in Chicago. After realizing there was more to life than telecom calling plans, he founded VocationVacations (www.vocationvacations.com). He is the author of “Test-Drive Your Dream Job – A Step-By-Step Guide to Finding and Creating the Work You Love” (Hachette, 2008) and is a sought-after speaker on how to pursue and attain one’s dream job and lifestyle. He has shared his wit and wisdom in appearances on NBC’s TODAY Show, CNN, MSNBC, CNBC and FOX News, and has been featured in articles in O, The Oprah Magazine, the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, Fortune Magazine and many more. Kurth co-executive produced “This Job’s A Trip” for the Travel Channel in 2006. A native of Madison, Wisconsin, Kurth lives in Portland, Oregon.

For more information on VocationVacations, visit www.vocationvacations.com.