

## 12.4 Getting the Right Stuff

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Explore the benefits of a four-year college education.
2. Understand the difference between work-based skills and transferable skills.
3. Learn how to use jobs, internships, and volunteering.

What do you need to launch a good career? Employers will look at your education, skills, and experience. Making sure you have the “right stuff” in these three areas is what you should focus on in your college experience.

### The Transfer Ticket

Are you in a two-year program or community college? Perhaps you decided to attend your college to save some money or to be able to explore a career before committing to a four-year program. Now you may find that a bachelor’s degree is worth pursuing because it appears to be a requirement for the kind of career you want or because you will be able to boost your income opportunities. If you are thinking about transferring to a four-year program, be sure to follow these steps:

1. Find out about the transfer program at your college. Most two-year colleges have a program designed to make sure you have the right kind of general education courses, electives, and courses related to your major so that you can transfer seamlessly into a junior year at a four-year institution.
2. Make sure your credits are transferable. Each four-year college or university has its own policies about what kind of credits it accepts. If you are considering one or two particular four-year colleges, find out about their transfer policies as you lay out your plan of studies. These policies are typically described in the college catalogs. Read them carefully to ensure you can transfer most if not all of your credits.
3. Talk to your advisor. Now. If you haven’t met with your advisor to discuss your ideas about transferring, do so soon. Your advisor will be a great help in formulating a plan of studies that meets your requirements for your associate’s degree and maximizes your transferable credits.
4. Does your college have **articulation agreements**? These agreements between your college and four-year institutions define specific requirements for transferring and make it easier for you to transfer from your college to the bachelor’s program in a four-year school.

If you are in a four-year college already but think your career objectives might be better filled in a program at another college, you should also go through steps two and three as soon as possible. It can save you a great deal of time, money, and heartbreak.

### Skilled Labor

The second requirement for employment is skills. Many of the skills you will need are career specific: we call those **work-based skills**. These include knowing how to use equipment that is specific to your career and mastering processes that are used in your

field. While some of these skills are learned and perfected on the job, you may be in a vocational track program (such as for homeland security officers, nurses aides, or paralegals) where you are learning your work-based skills.

These are not the only skills you will need to be successful. The second set of skills you must have are called **transferable skills** because they can be used in almost all occupations. These include thinking skills, communication skills, listening skills—in fact, most of the skills for college success we have been stressing throughout this book are transferable skills because they are also key to success in life. This skill set is very broad, and your extent of mastery will vary from skill to skill; therefore, you should identify those skills that are most important to your career objective and develop and master them. Review your occupation profile on O\*Net (<http://online.onetcenter.org/find>) to determine which skills you need to prove to potential employers you have mastered.

### EXERCISE 3: TRANSFERABLE SKILLS INVENTORY

In the list of forty transferable skills that follows, *underline* five skills you believe you have mastered and then describe specific ways in which you have used each skill successfully. Then *circle* five skills you think are important to your career that you have not mastered yet. Describe specific steps you plan to take to master those skills.

Active listening	Decision making	Negotiating	Researching
Active learning	Editing	Observing	Selling
Analyzing	Evaluating	Organizing	Speaking a second language
Budgeting	Forecasting	Perceiving Feelings	Supervising
Coaching	Goal setting	Persuading	Teaching
Communicating	Handling a crisis	Planning	Teamwork
Consulting	Handling details	Problem solving	Time management
Creative thinking	Manipulating numbers	Public speaking	Training
Critical thinking	Mentoring	Reading	Visualizing
Customer service	Motivating	Reporting	Writing

Skills I have mastered	Examples of how I used them

<b>Skills I still need to master</b>	<b>How I will master them</b>

Going over the list in Exercise 3, you will find that you have at least some experience in many of them, but you probably haven't thought that much about them because you use them in so many ways that you take them for granted. It is important to think about all your activities and consider the skills you have applied successfully; your transferable skills inventory is larger than you may think. For example, if you volunteer as a big brother or big sister, you have skills in active listening, mentoring, time management, and probably coaching. If you have written a college paper, you have skills in visualizing, researching, communicating, and writing.

Be aware of the ways you develop and master transferable skills. Keep a list of them, and update it every month or two. That will be a valuable tool for you as you work with your career development and ultimately with job applications.

### **Are You Ready for a Test Drive?**

Are you frustrated by the fact that even entry-level jobs require some experience? Experience is the third set of qualifications employers look for, and it's the one that often stumps students. Relevant experience is not only important as a job qualification; it can also provide you with a means to explore or test out occupational options and build a contact list that will be valuable when networking for your career.

But how can you gain relevant experience without experience to begin with? You should consider three options: volunteering, internships, and part-time employment.

**Volunteering** is especially good for students looking to work in social and artistic occupations, but students looking for work in other occupation types should not shy away from this option. You can master many transferable skills through volunteering! Certainly it is easy to understand that if you want to be in an artistic field, volunteering at a museum or performance center can provide you with relevant experience. But what if you want to work in an engineering field? Volunteering for an organization promoting green energy would be helpful. Looking for a career in homeland security? Do volunteer work with the Red Cross or the Coast Guard Auxiliary. With a little brainstorming and an understanding of your career field, you should be able to come up with relevant volunteer experiences for just about any career.

**Internships** focus on gaining practical experience related to a course or program of study. Interns work for an organization or company for a reduced wage or stipend or volunteer in exchange for practical experience. A successful internship program should create a win-win situation: the intern should add value to the company's efforts, and the company should provide a structured program in which the student can learn or practice work-related skills. Internships are typically held during summers or school vacation periods, though on occasion they can be scheduled for a set block of time each week during the course of a regular school term.

Once you secure an internship (usually through a normal job application process aided by a faculty member or the career guidance or placement office), it is important to have a written agreement with the employer in which the following is stated:

1. The learning objective for the internship
2. The time commitment you will invest (including work hours)
3. The work the company expects you to do
4. The work your supervisor will do for the college and for the student (internship progress reports, evaluations, etc.)

This written agreement may seem like overkill, but it is critical to ensure that the internship experience doesn't degrade into unsatisfying tasks such as photocopying and filing.

Remember that a key objective of your internship is to develop relationships you can use for mentoring and networking during your career. Befriend people, ask questions, go the extra mile in terms of what is expected of you, and generally participate in the enterprise. The extra effort will pay dividends in the future.

**Part-time employment** may be an option if your study schedule provides enough free time. If so, be sure to investigate opportunities in your field of study. Ask your instructors and the career guidance or placement office to help you generate job leads, even if they are not specifically in the area you want to be working in. It is valuable and relevant to hold a job designing Web sites for an advertising agency, for example, if your specific job objective is to produce event marketing. The understanding of how an advertising agency works and the contacts you make will make the experience worthwhile.

If you are lucky enough to have a job in your field of study already and are using your college experience to enhance your career opportunities, be sure to link what you are learning to what you do on the job—and what you do on the job to what you are learning. Ask your supervisor and employer about ideas you have picked up in class, and ask your instructors about the practices you apply at work. This cross-linking will make you a

much stronger candidate for future opportunities and a much better student in the short term.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Employers look at candidates who have the right education, the right skills, and the right experience.
- Progress in many career opportunities is enhanced by more advanced education; you should work, however, to make sure the education you are already getting counts.
- Be sure you can identify and show mastery in transferable skills as well as work-related skills.
- Experience through volunteering, internships, and part-time jobs will illustrate to potential employers that you can work in your chosen field, but it is also instrumental to help create a network of colleagues to enhance your career development.

## CHECKPOINT EXERCISES

1. Read the famous “fence whitewashing” story in Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (<http://www.inspirational-short-stories.com/tom-sawyer-fence.html>). What transferable skills does Tom demonstrate? What work-related skills does he demonstrate?

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2. Why is having a written internship agreement important?

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