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Linking the classroom more tightly to a realistic career

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I recently explored the distressing trend of higher education devolving into an ultra-expensive job-training program rather than giving students the opportunity to discover what direction to set the course for their life's journey.

This begged the million-dollar question of how to actually figure out what the destinations on that voyage should be.

It's only a slight exaggeration - at an average price of \$100,000 for a four-year degree, not including interest payments on student loans, "What are you studying?" and "What are you going to do once you graduate?" are perhaps the costliest, most frightening inquiries a college student fields.

As has always been the case, some students naturally and effortlessly get through college, and life, either by knowing the right people or by knowing how to get others to help unravel their mystery. Others luck into opportunities and work hard every step of the way until they've forged their own path. But no one teaches students exactly how to figure out the beginning of their careers for themselves.

Or so I thought until students at the University of Texas contacted me to share how their internships in the Intellectual Entrepreneurship (IE) program there taught them how to find their calling.

Justin Jefferson, a native Texan who graduated in May, told me how he, as the first in his family to attend college, showed up on campus four years ago with nothing more than a vague notion that he might want to go to medical school.

"It was very intimidating to figure it all out," Jefferson said. "I kind of thought I wanted to be a doctor, but I didn't have any contacts like the other kids I was going to school with who said, 'I can do an internship at my dad's hospital.' Me? I was just there all alone on that big campus not even knowing how to find out more."

Once Jefferson got into the IE program on the suggestion of an adviser, he set about the semester-long task of seeking out graduate student mentors, faculty members and experts in the field of medicine to learn how they got into their present careers and whether he might replicate their success. In the process, he got real laboratory experience under his belt, figured out he didn't actually want to become a medical doctor, and earned a graduate research assistantship in biotechnology.

"Basically I learned how to seek the right people out, get them to talk to me, and build contacts," Jefferson said. "It was hard. Growing up, my parents worked and worked just to put a roof over my head and food on the table, so I just didn't have the communication skills or the confidence to speak up for myself - until I took this class."

Precious few college students know how to ask professors and experts in an area of interest for their time, experiences, contacts and recommendations - most don't even know they're allowed to be so bold. Business networking, an essential life skill, is not intuitive, and rarely is it explicitly taught.

"Students come to college without a strong idea of what it's going to take to make it in college and beyond - and it has changed. The college model of education traditionally consisted of some combination of certification or apprenticeship and then entitlement to a career - that's no longer the case," said Rick Cherwitz, director of the IE Consortium on the Austin campus. "We need to teach students how to identify their passions and plan how to discover the pathways to careers in those areas so they can build an education around those aspirations."

Though specialized programs are not within every student's reach, curiosity, good people skills and the persistence to gain access to other people's professional worlds are. Charting a course for a successful life's journey is not easy, but it begins with unabashedly asking for help at every turn.

Sarah Kettles, an Ann Arbor, Mich., resident who will be starting her junior year this week, told me that through the IE program she considered multiple majors, networked her way into a student job in the field of psychology, and feels confident that this discipline is her true passion.

Her advice: "Don't wait to take control and explore - and don't be afraid. There are people out there who had someone who made their career possible and want to help you and see you succeed. Go find them."

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