Helping students find themselves

TNS FORUM
By Chris Palmer
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As the student came into my office, I could see that something was wrong. She was pale and her shoulders sagged. "Are you OK?" I asked. "Not really," she said. "I'm graduating in two months and I don't have a job. I've been looking everywhere and networking like crazy, but nothing is panning out for me."

Sadly, many soon-to-be graduates feel anxious about their future. They worry about landing a job, especially one that is fulfilling; finding mentors; networking effectively and paying off their student loans.

Much of this angst derives from the failure of colleges to prepare their students for the real world. Colleges – and professors like me – must do more to help students succeed after they leave college, both in life and in their careers.

We need to help students find out who they really are, what they're passionate about, and how to articulate their life and career goals.

One of the most important things students can do to succeed in the real world is to create personal mission statements. I know this from experience. When I was 23, I had completed my bachelor's and master's degrees in engineering and was set to pursue a career designing and building warships for the British Royal Navy. But I felt adrift, confused, unhappy.

I realized I needed a plan. I decided to create a mission statement in which I would articulate what I wanted in life. Doing so was challenging but ultimately transformative. It helped me to find the life I wanted to lead, and that life had nothing to do with engineering or warships. My mission statement led me to a career in conservation and filmmaking and, eventually, teaching and writing.

Many students struggle with issues of identity, meaning and purpose. Writing a personal mission statement enables them to think deeply about the kind of life they will find fulfilling.

That's crucial, but it's not enough. Students also need the skills to advance. Technical knowledge and good grades are important. But it is equally important to be professional, hardworking, reliable, trustworthy and collaborative. Employers want to hire people who have good communication skills, are able to solve problems, and work well with others.

These attributes are sometimes called "soft skills," but that takes away from their rigor and substance. For example, if you misread social cues, can't maintain eye contact in an interview, don't chat comfortably at networking events, or fail to shake hands properly – that is, if you have poor communication skills – you will have a hard time advancing in your career.

"Employers want people who can think critically, work in diverse teams, and who can take complex information, come to a conclusion and make a recommendation," former Secretary of Education Arne Duncan told the Wall Street Journal this fall. He worries that students are not graduating from college "career-ready." Two years earlier, the Chronicle of Higher Education stated, "Employers care more about ethics, critical thinking, creative thinking, and common sense … along with a mindset of lifelong learning and a strong work ethic" than about, for example, an employee's college major.

Wall Street executive and author Ben Carpenter made an excellent recommendation in the New York Times, saying, "Colleges need to create, and require for graduation, a course in high quality career training that would begin freshman year and end senior year." Several colleges, such as Connecticut College, are now doing this with much success.

One of the most important "soft skills" is the ability to take risks in a scary world. A student who is graduating this May told me, "The biggest hurdle I have to overcome is my constant fear of failing."

I often hear this from students. But failure has a stigma it doesn't deserve. Failure is an unpleasant, but essential, part of striving and learning. Failing does not mean you are a failure. It means you are trying hard, taking risks and getting out of your comfort zone – all necessary precursors to success. Colleges are neglecting to teach real world lessons like these. We must do better.

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