



Career Preparation throughout College: *Ace the Ultimate Final*

Going to college? That's great. After all, there are lots of good reasons to pursue post-secondary education (whether [career and technical training, certification, associate's / bachelor's degree, or beyond](#)). That being said, what's the *# 1 reason* to pursue further education beyond high school? To prepare for a satisfying and rewarding career, of course!

Yet, getting ready for your first professional position goes *well beyond* doing what it takes to earn your credentials. To become "career ready", you also need to:

- apply what you're learning,
- gain experience,
- and develop the skills employers look for in new college grads.

Think of it this way. Throughout your entire college career, you're preparing for your single most important final exam. And, if you ace this test, you'll land a great job! But there's no way to cram for this final. Why not? Because there are lots of *academic and professional "pre-requisites"* you must fulfill before you can even sit for this exam.

The timelines below outline the actions you should take while in college in order to achieve your college and career goals and are categorized as follows:

- **On-going:** actions listed in this timeline require your attention *throughout* your college years. They are grouped into three focus areas: *career planning and decision making, college success, and career readiness*.
- **By student status:** these actions are sorted by and should be taken during a specific academic year: freshman, sophomore, junior, senior year.

Note that, while these timelines are intended to provide a fairly comprehensive list of the "pre-requisites" you should fulfill during college, you may have already completed some of these actions (especially if you were proactive in planning and choosing your college major and career path while you were in high school). Therefore, you should modify these timelines as needed, based on your specific circumstances.



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On-going (throughout college)

Required Actions

Career Planning & Decision Making

- Actively explore careers of interest to you. Expand / narrow your career options by assessing how well they engage your unique profile of talents, interests, personality preferences, and values. This exploration is essential so that you understand and can articulate the types of work tasks and environments that fit you well.

Self-knowledge and an understanding of the world of work is foundational in:

- choosing a major / area of study,
 - identifying and engaging in meaningful experiential learning activities such as internships,
 - preparing for a rewarding and satisfying career.
- Take full advantage of the programs, services, and resources your college's Career Services office offers.
 - Keep a running record of your career-building activities and accomplishments (e.g., part-time jobs (on- and off-campus), internships, volunteer experiences, leadership roles in clubs / organizations, coursework related to your occupational field of interest, samples of pertinent class or research projects, etc.).

You'll need this information to:

- prepare, update, and refine your internship / job search correspondence (i.e., cover letters, resumes, job applications, etc.),
- build your [portfolio](#) (if applicable in your occupational field),
- apply to grad school or for a [fellowship](#).

College Success

- Set short- and long-term goals for college success. Plan and execute the necessary actions to achieve your goals. Monitor and adjust your action plans as needed.



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Required Actions

- Meet with your Academic Advisor to develop your academic plan. Check in every year to ensure that you're on track to meet the requirements for your major and graduation (and, if applicable, the requisites needed to transfer from a community college to a four-year school).
- Register for classes early in each registration period.
- Set goals, track your grade point average (GPA) using a [GPA calculator](#), and maintain strong grades. Be aware of how your GPA impacts:
 - enrollment in prerequisite classes,
 - acceptance into your major,
 - your scholarships, financial aid, and / or full-time student status,
 - internships and job opportunities.
- As needed, utilize campus support services and resources designed to ensure student success (e.g., tutoring, writing center, counseling services, etc.).
- Maintain a healthy lifestyle. Balance academics, campus / social life, and personal well-being (e.g., proper nutrition, exercise and sleep; relaxation; stress management, etc.).

Career Readiness

- Acquire the training / education, knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary to become "career ready".

Career readiness encompasses seven key competencies employers consider essential for a successful transition from college to career:

- Career & Self-Development
- Communications
- Critical Thinking
- Equity & Inclusion



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Required Actions

- Leadership
- Professionalism
- Teamwork

(For more information: [Career Readiness: Competencies for a Career-Ready Workforce.](#))

- Always maintain a positive presence on social media (e.g., LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram, etc.). Also, set up a professional email address and voice mail message. Answer phone calls and respond to emails in a professional manner.

Freshman Year

Required Actions

- Set short- and long-term goals for college success throughout your freshman year. Plan and execute the necessary actions to achieve your goals. Monitor and adjust your action plans as needed.
- Take a “First-Year Experience” or “Career Exploration” class.
- Get a part-time job to gain work experience (on campus through student employment or off campus).
- Visit Career Services to learn about services, resources, and programs. Register for your college’s career network / job listings platform, which provides information about internships and job postings; career-related workshops, webinars and events; job fairs; on-campus interviews; alumni mentoring programs; and much more.
- Meet with a Career Counselor / Career Advisor to take assessments to uncover your aptitudes, interests, personality preferences, and values. Learn how your



CAREER VISION

Required Actions

unique profile connects to college majors and careers. (*For more information:* [Career Vision Start Early, Start Smart Career Readiness Program](#); [Career Vision Start Smart Career Launch & Early Career Program](#).)

- Explore your major (whether declared, intended, or under consideration). Contact Academic Advising for access to “*What Can I Do with a Major in...*” profiles. These profiles provide detailed information about the most common occupational fields / job titles / work environments associated with a specific major. Check GPA requirements to get accepted into / stay in the major.
- Learn about your preliminary careers of interest through:
 - occupational research,
 - informational interviews,
 - job shadowing
- Get involved in student organizations, service programs, and / or volunteerism (on campus or off). Look for organizations with missions that relate well to your interests and career goals.
- Participate in a *Resume Writing Workshop / Webinar* (or get a resume sample packet from Career Services). Draft a resume, go to Career Services for a resume critique, and make recommended edits. (*For more information:* [Princeton University Resume Guide](#); [Princeton University Cover Letter Guide](#).)
- Apply for and secure a summer job (or on-site or virtual internship) in late fall or early winter, as many of these opportunities are *filled* in March or April. Look for positions that relate to your career interests whenever possible.



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Sophomore Year

Required Actions

- Set short- and long-term goals for college success throughout your sophomore year. Plan and execute the necessary actions to achieve your goals. Monitor and adjust your action plans as needed.
- Continue to expand, narrow, and refine your career options. Set up a meeting with your Career Advisor to discuss careers under consideration. Ask your Career Advisor to recommend alumni or others you should contact for informational interviews and job shadows; seek advice for finding applicable internship opportunities.
- Update your resume to include your summer job (or internship). Get a critique and make recommended edits.
- Set up a LinkedIn profile. Go to Career Services for a LinkedIn critique, and make recommended edits. Join groups and follow companies associated with your career interests (not only to learn more about career options, but to build your professional network).
- Participate in a *Networking Skills Workshop / Webinar*. Develop and practice your 30-second [networking introduction](#). (For more information: [Princeton University Networking Guide](#).)
- Attend networking events and panel discussions hosted by Career Services (not only to learn about occupations of interest to you, but to build your professional network).
- Continue your involvement in student organizations, service programs, and / or volunteerism. By the end of this academic year, identify at least one organization you plan to lead in the future (e.g., chair a committee or take on a leadership role). If applicable, explore and apply for opportunities to assist a professor with a research project.



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Required Actions

- Attend a Job / Internship Fair and start your search for a summer internship. Also tap your professional network to uncover internship opportunities. (*For more information:* [Top 10 Tips to Maximize Your College Career Fair Experience.](#))
- Apply for, secure, and actively engage an internship (or a summer job.) Ask for a letter of reference from your internship or summer job manager when you leave the position (*assuming, of course, that you did a good job*).
- Prepare for internship interviews:
 - polish your resume,
 - participate in an Interviewing Skills Workshop / Webinar,
 - do a mock interview and get feedback (for more information: [Princeton University Interview Guide](#)).
- Develop a [reference list](#) and set up a reference letter file.
- Declare your major by the deadline.
- Select elective courses for your junior year that provide opportunities to round out your academic experiences and develop / enhance your soft skills, especially those that employers look for when hiring new college grads (i.e., critical thinking / problem solving, oral / written communications, teamwork, digital technology, leadership, professionalism / work ethic, career management, global / intercultural fluency). (*For more information:* [Career Readiness: Competencies for a Career-Ready Workforce.](#))
- If you plan to attend graduate school immediately after earning your undergraduate degree, explore possible programs and admissions requirements.



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Junior Year

Required Actions

- Set short- and long-term goals for college success throughout your junior year. Plan and execute the necessary actions to achieve your goals. Monitor and adjust your action plans as needed.
- If you've transferred from a community college to a four-year school, visit Career Services to learn about services, resources, and programs and meet with your Career Advisor. Also meet with your Academic Advisor to develop your academic plan.
- Chair a committee or take on a leadership role in a student / service organization on campus (and / or assist a professor with a research project, if applicable).
- Get professional attire for interviews and networking events.
- Ask for references (from your internship manager, professors, club / student organization sponsors, personal connections, mentors, etc.).
- Update your resume, [reference list](#), and LinkedIn profile. (*For more information: [Princeton University Resume Guide](#); [Princeton University Cover Letter Guide](#).*)
- Update and practice your 30-second [networking introduction](#).
- Expand and nurture your professional network. For example:
 - attend networking events, panel discussions, and employer presentations hosted by Career Services,
 - connect with alumni,
 - get a student membership in a [professional association](#) related to your occupational field and participate in relevant events / webinars. (*For more information: [CareerOneStop Professional Association Finder](#).*)
- Attend job / career fairs and apply for / secure a second internship. (*For more information: [Top 10 Tips to Maximize Your College Career Fair Experience](#).*)



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Required Actions

- Participate in a *Career Portfolio Workshop / Webinar*. Collect writing samples from college coursework, examples of class projects, and other artifacts (such as artwork if you're in a creative major) to highlight your accomplishments. Design your [portfolio](#). Strategize ways to incorporate your portfolio when responding to relevant interview questions and practice your presentation.
- Assess how well the career options you're exploring engage your unique profile of talents, interests, personality preferences, and values. Crystallize your career goals.
- Assess your progress towards career readiness and select major / elective courses for your senior year that provide opportunities to round out your academic experiences and develop the soft skills that employers look for when hiring new college grads).
- If you plan to attend graduate school immediately after earning your undergraduate degree:
 - prepare for and take entrance exams,
 - investigate programs, application requirements, and deadlines,
 - put together an action plan for applying to programs.

Senior Year

Required Actions

- Set short- and long-term goals for college success throughout your senior year. Plan and execute the necessary actions to achieve your goals. Monitor and adjust your action plans as needed.
- If you plan to attend graduate school immediately after earning your undergraduate degree, complete graduate school applications by the deadline



CAREER VISION

Required Actions

- Meet with your Academic Advisor for a final audit to ensure major and graduation requirements will be met.
- If planning to do another internship or a part-time job during your senior year, apply for and secure it.
- Make concrete plans for career options. Narrow and finalize your career choices to determine the types of jobs you'll target in your job search for your first professional position.
- Participate in workshops / webinars on *Job Search Strategies / Salary Negotiations* and *Using Social Media in Job Search*.
- Develop and implement a job search plan (*including a timeline*) and:
 - attend job fairs and networking events,
 - contact Career Services to get the on-campus recruiting schedule and register for interviews that relate to your career goals,
 - tap your professional network to uncover job leads,
 - search job posting boards and LinkedIn,
 - research companies and check their websites for job openings

Start your professional job search early (as many employers hire college seniors in fall semester with a start date in the following summer).
- Update your resume and LinkedIn profile, [reference list](#), and [portfolio](#) artifacts.
- Polish your interviewing skills. Prepare your attire for interviewing.
- Ensure that your social media presence, voicemail message, emails, and text messages project a professional image.
- Continue to broaden and nurture your professional network. Expand your presence on LinkedIn by contributing to group discussions that relate to your career interests.



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Required Actions

- Continue leadership roles in student / service organizations (and / or assist a professor with a research project, if applicable).
- Evaluate and compare job offers.
- Accept your first professional position and set goals for career success!