Career Education is About More than Getting a Job After Graduation, Career Counselors Say

By Jo KAADLER

Melanie Huff has a busy job. If she’s not on the phone with a newspaper editor, she’s persuading a journalism alum to come and talk with current students about their profession. Or she’s planning a workshop on career tips for reporters, counseling students to consider their long-term goals, or compiling her weekly email of job openings from her office on the seventh floor of the Journalism building.

Because Huff has worked as the career services coordinator for the Graduate School of Journalism since 1989, she knows what student journalists need to do to secure employment when they graduate. In addition to making the most of their 10-month, hands-on program, she believes J-school students should be proactive when looking for work and not just react to the announcements on websites or classified ads when a job is available. In other words, Huff says that the field of journalism is always changing due to budgets and personnel, and so students are more likely to hire people they already know than those who are less well known.

“In this economy, going in cold or waiting for a job posting is not a good way to job hunt,” Huff advises. “Instead, it’s important to target places that you’re qualified for and interested in, establish relationships there and then be available when something serious comes up.”

Huff’s advice reflects a growing trend in career education, one that encourages prospective employees to think differently about their careers and take more non-traditional steps toward pursuing their goals. Rather than merely emailing off a resume and crossing their fingers for a call-back, Huff would like students to consider the variety of factors when exploring their futures. And considering the class of 2002 is facing one of the worst economies and most difficult job markets in years, career counselors like Huff say that aggressive planning and thorough research will be the keys to vocational success.

Huff, along with directors from almost a dozen other career centers in various schools across campus, offers students, graduates and alumni individualized and ongoing support for career preparation, job search and employment. They work with faculty advisors and alumni in guiding students through what can often be an intimidating maze of job hunting. Consequently, they provide a variety of workshops and helpful workshops throughout the year for the Columbia community.

Several graduate schools on campus—like the J-school—also offer particular career services to equip graduate students in their field. The School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA), for instance, requires a one credit professional development course as well as three to six credits of related internships. SIPA also offers a mentoring program with over 1400 SIPA alumni who provide career information and guidance, according to Meg Hennehan, SIPA’s director of career services. The School of Social Work provides daily information on job openings in the nonprofit, social and community services fields, and the School regularly hosts company recruiters to meet with graduating business students.

The Center for Career Education (CCE) (www.columbia.edu/cu/cce/) at Morningside Drive and West 116th Street serves undergraduate and graduate students in Columbia College (CC), the Fu Foundation School of Engineering and Applied Sciences, the School of General Studies, the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, and the Graduate School of the Arts, and collaborates with the career education centers established in other schools.

Though probably about 25 percent of this [undergraduate] class will directly go on to graduate and professional school full time, and another 20 percent will find employment, the rest will either delay their job search or try to dive in as an undergraduate because “they don’t know what they want,” says Christopher Pratt, dean of College Student Development and a Center for Career Education. “That means they need to do some self-assessment and to find those who know what they are, who they want and what they have to offer.”

Pratt suggests that self-awareness is perhaps the most important step in career planning. In fact, having a strong sense of one’s own beliefs, attitudes and interests can help any professional map out his path. As a result, Pratt and the rea- son CCE publishes a career planner workbook for students so they can better process each step of their professional development. The Center also provides numerous workshops throughout the year on subjects such as self-assessment, resume writing, vocational testing, interviewing skills, researching specific fields and networking.

Beginning in their first year, Columbia students are encouraged to register with CCE to begin their career development process and take advantage of the various services. Of the 4,012 CC students in 2002, 3,304 registered with CCE. Of that number, 1,244 sought career counseling and 337 attended workshop to improve their career skills. Pratt—who this spring shifted the focus of career services to career education as a way of emphasizing the integrative process of life experiences—believes the statistics reflect a variety of issues facing contemporary college students. Specifically, he believes that today’s students are more likely to hire people they already know than those who are less well known.

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**RECORD PHOTO BY JO KAADMIN**

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