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'If I knew then what I know now': Advice for college graduates

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If you had a time machine, would you travel into the future to see what's in store for you 10, 20 or 30 years from now? Or would you rather travel back in time, perhaps right after college graduation, to fix a mistake you made or take another path in life?

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As college seniors get ready to graduate in the coming months, they will be faced with making big decisions on everything from their career to their finances to their personal and professional relationships. So we asked recent graduates, seasoned professionals and hiring managers to get in a virtual time machine and finish the following sentence: "If I knew then what I know now..." What would they have done differently post-graduation? How can their hindsight help the class of 2012 and beyond?

Here's what they had to say:

I would find the right job fit

"If I only knew how important job 'fit' was to one's strengths, weaknesses, values, likes, dislikes and work style, I might have gone down a different career path. I was misaligned for years in an industry that I had little interest in. It took a company layoff for me to take a step back and realize my true passion was in my current field of college career guidance. Today I tell students, 'Don't waste your talents or your precious life.' I strongly suggest to college graduates to complete an interests assessment and have a good understanding of themselves before they start their career paths." — *Elizabeth Venturini, college career strategist*

I would seek out a mentor

"Seek out mentors throughout your career, because guess what? No one knows everything. If you don't have a mentor in your office, network in your industry until you find one. Building a strong career support system is key to career success — whether you are entry level or a seasoned VP." — *Jennifer Maguire Coughlin, president, Jennifer Maguire Coughlin Public Relations*

I would pursue my passions

"Do what you love and trust the rewards will follow. A young friend of mine dropped out of college and decided he'd try music — or as he put it — jump out of the airplane and hope he could stitch a parachute on the way down. He has, and five years later his music is selling and he has toured the world, getting an education he'd never have had in college. I know that a college education is important to lots of careers, but it should be a career you really want ... it is better to major in something you want to learn and will love, whether there is a job in it or not. But if you love it enough, chances are you'll find or create the job to fill your dreams." — *Walter Meyer, author of "Rounding Third"*

I would think long term

"Plan your career with current and future flexibility preferences in mind. Think not only about what you're doing right now or want to do in the short term, but about your longer-term career path and how your personal choices might affect your future family life. For example, if you want to pursue a career in law but are looking for some flexible options when it comes to work, there are specialties that lend themselves to that ... I can say with confidence that an initial focus on integrating the two will result in much smarter long-term choices and comfort." — *Allison O'Kelly, founder/CEO, national flexible staffing firm Mom Corps*

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I would start planning early and use my college career center

“I graduated from the University of Georgia in December 2005 and have been working and not working for the past seven years since graduation. If I only knew [then] what I know now, I would have used my college’s career center much more effectively and begun my job hunt in the spring rather than the fall. I also would have made the effort to have more internships in my desired field and created a stream of income for myself to offset the challenge of finding a job.” – *Eboné Smiley, independent stylist, jewelry company Stella & Dot*

I would be more cognizant of college expenses

“I would have been much more diligent in trying to reduce my college expenses. College wasn’t as expensive back then as it is now, but it was still a major financial burden. Rather than trying to minimize expenses before I graduated, I found myself on graduation day with more debt than I should have. I likely qualified for several scholarships and grants, but I never fully investigated the topic. I rarely worked a part-time job or paid internship during school, although I could have fit it into my schedule. I did work hard on my schoolwork, but I could have done more to ease the debt I graduated with.” – *Andrew Schrage, co-owner, Money Crashers Personal Finance*

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