

Seniors, No Luck on Job Hunt? Don't Panic -- There's Still Time

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Halfway through her senior year at the University of Richmond in Virginia, Kelly Gribbin panicked. Graduation loomed, she hadn't found a job and she wasn't even sure what career she wanted to pursue.

Ms. Gribbin, now 26 years old and working at a job she loves, was experiencing what many students -- and their anxious parents -- are facing now. While the college job market is robust, plenty of seniors still haven't gotten jobs. Some have stumbled in interviews. Others haven't targeted their searches well. And some haven't even started seriously looking.

The good news: It isn't too late. Many companies, particularly smaller ones or those in industries that don't forecast hiring needs far in advance, recruit during the second semester. Even some big traditional fall recruiters, such as accounting firms, investment banks and management-consulting firms, may need to do some more hiring in the spring if people renege or hiring needs increase.

College counselors advise students to figure out what the problem is. Have they landed interviews but not offers? Sometimes, students suffer in interviews from not having researched the company or the job sufficiently, says Peg Hendershot, director of Career Vision, a career counseling group in Glen Ellyn, Ill. Students also need to dress appropriately for the kind of job they are seeking. That often means leaving the sneakers behind in their dorm room. And they should consider doing some practice interviews. Career counselors can conduct mock interviews with students and evaluate their skills.

If students have distributed résumés but not nabbed interviews, they may not have appropriately tailored their résumés to the job. Counselors recommend candidates customize their résumés for each type of job they apply for, highlighting different skills and experiences depending on what is most relevant for the position.

Many students have a deeper problem: not having thought about the career they want to pursue. Of course, few students have absolute certainty about their long-term job goals. Counselors say it is important to have at least some sense of direction. Recruiters like candidates to show passion and curiosity about the jobs they are seeking. Informational interviews, career services, parents, older friends, alumni, siblings and books can all help students figure out where to start. The key is setting aside time during an already hectic school year to contemplate these career issues.

"Make looking for a job a priority," Ms. Hendershot says. Students are more likely to end up happy if they take the time to figure out what they want, rather than accepting something out of desperation. Ms. Gribbin wishes she hadn't let panic prompt her to take a job that made her miserable. Before graduating in spring 2002 with a major in leadership studies and psychology and a minor in music, she "was really unsure about what I wanted to do after college," she says.

During the first semester of her senior year, Ms. Gribbin attended job fairs and dropped off résumés. She didn't work hard to sell herself -- or follow up with recruiters -- because she didn't know whether she really wanted any of those positions. She also started applying to law school, mostly "because I didn't know what else to do."

In February, she got a call from a health-care company. She was the president of the student government, and the company previously recruited student leaders from her school for a management-training program. She didn't ask enough questions to fully understand what she'd be doing, but she accepted the position anyway. "I felt like, 'I have to get a job,' " she says.

After graduating, she moved to Philadelphia to start work. Her assignment put her in human resources, helping to handle questions about an online performance review system. By the end of her first month, she was bored and dissatisfied and knew she wanted to leave.

The experience forced Ms. Gribbin to consider her career aspirations -- something she now realizes she should have done sooner. She figured out that she likes working with people and had enjoyed being involved in university affairs while at school. As a result, she decided to apply for graduate programs in university administration.

In the meantime, she applied for jobs at universities. She got one in admissions at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania, and she worked there before entering a masters program at Ohio State in 2003. Today she works in student affairs at DePaul University in Chicago, helping freshmen get oriented to college. "I love it," she says. "You need to take a little time [to figure out] what's going to be a good fit for you."