

Starting a Career Conversation with Your Child

“What are you going to do after Tufts?”

Your child will repeatedly ~ and often, uncomfortably ~ answer this question throughout four years of college. The peak season is underway right now. Students at home for the holidays will connect with family, friends, and neighbors, all inquiring about life after Tufts. The question is intended to be a conversation starter, much like the one posed four years ago: *“Where are you going to college?”* However, in both cases, the inquiries may backfire, closing down rather than opening up dialogue.

The fact is, many students don't have firm answers to this question. Just like high school seniors awaiting admissions decisions, college seniors may be unsure of their next steps. At the other end of the academic spectrum, first year students may still be adjusting to a new school, new friends, and the rigors of Tufts academics.

Specific characteristics have emerged in recent years among Tufts students engaged in career decision-making. Inquisitive and eager to learn, they reflect the experience of a demanding broad-based liberal arts education coupled with an extraordinarily active campus life. This profile overlaps with the more generalized attributes of the Millennial generation, also called Gen Y or Nexters. This is the group born roughly between 1980 and 2000 ~ young people known for their high expectations, technological savvy, and borderless culture. They have been nurtured with esteem and resources (“You can do anything!”), pressured to excel (by themselves and others), and strongly influenced by parents (whose involvement they typically welcome).

More recently, the fallout from economic turbulence has touched students' lives with both personal and professional ramifications. They recognize implications for themselves as they seek internships and jobs, and for their families, who may have experienced serious financial setbacks.

This confluence of factors creates several themes today among Tufts students:

- Many and varied interests, which may lead to indecision about majors and careers
- Anxiety and stress about making the ‘right’ decision
- Preference for individualized attention

Career Services is structured to deliver services and programs that respond to student needs associated with this profile: encouraging one-on-one appointments to offer individualized feedback; coaching students on the value/marketability of a Tufts education; and emphasizing professional mobility, which means that a first job after Tufts will neither define a career nor predict future direction.

In career development, as well as economic forecasting, the only certainty is change. That said, the career planning process ~ a *four-step model of self-awareness, research, experience, and decision-making* ~ is more important today than ever before. Taking

charge of your career is critical for professionals of all ages, beginning with undergraduates on their way to the workplace. Your student will develop answers to their own career questions and feel ready to answer yours by engaging in careful self-assessment to understand their own skills, interests, and values; exploring occupations, employers, and industries; and networking with professionals to gain useful information.

As a parent and investor in your student's education, you have a right to expect answers. You can help by engaging your children in conversation, listening to their ideas and concerns, and pointing them in our direction <http://careers.tufts.edu>. Career Services is ready to support them, wherever they are on the spectrum of career development

Here are some suggestions to create a productive, low-stress career conversation with your child during winter break:

Conversation Stoppers

'Career' is not in their vocabulary

In a recent focus group conducted by Career Services to examine our communication process with students, we learned that the word 'career' can be perceived as intimidating or, in the case of younger undergraduates, deemed irrelevant at their stage. Some students reported that it connotes a "long-term commitment," which they view as daunting. On the other hand, they said they felt more comfortable with language such as "internships" and "jobs."

What are you going to do with a (fill-in-the-blank) major?

This question sets a negative tone, implying that you disapprove and thereby undermining a child's confidence in making a major independent decision. If you're concerned about major choice, try to learn more about your student's academic interest. Ask what other Tufts alumni have done with the degree and check the Tufts Career Network (available to your child through WebCenter) to search 8,000 alumni by major. You may also explore "What can I do with a major in?" at <http://careers.tufts.edu/students/majors/thismajor>.

'Shoulds' shut down dialogue

"Trust that we know what we're doing ... most of the time," said one student in a focus group. "Don't talk down to us." Students feel as if they've made a giant leap in their transition to the rigorous academic environment at Tufts; they hope for trust and respect from parents, an acknowledgement of their progression from child at home to young adult on campus.

Unanswerable questions

Job and internship search is a process. For many seniors participating in the Tufts recruiting program and for undergraduates seeking internships, the quest is still in progress. They may have no answer to "What are you going to do with your life" or even, "What are you going to do next summer?" Unanswerable questions underscore a student's stress and anxiety whereas open-ended questions (see below) can keep the

conversation going. Just as importantly, coach your child about how to develop “scripts” ~ which should never be perceived as such ~ to respond to family and friends asking these same questions. Rather than saying, “I don’t know” or “I’m still looking,” they can accentuate the positive: “I’m exploring opportunities in (fill-in-the-blank)” or “I’m interested in (career/employer/industry)” or “I’m learning more about” It’s helpful to provide a nugget of information in your response, so that the listener can offer assistance if it’s a company, industry, or discipline which they know.

Timing is everything

Students may interpret the concept of ‘break’ quite literally. From the fast-paced, deadline-oriented world at Tufts, they may crave a respite from academics as well as career pressures. On the other hand, you’ve been waiting eagerly for the opportunity to ask all your questions. Seek compromise by arranging a good time to talk.

Conversation Starters

Open-ended questions work best.

Students continually face important challenges: choosing a major, planning classes, finding an internship, looking for jobs, applying to graduate school. At any given point in time, they may not have closure on any of these tasks, which leads to uneasiness. Thus, “Have you found an internship for next summer?” can exacerbate self-induced stress; whereas a more generalized exploration may be more apt to open a flow of information. Try to begin with a question which they can actually answer: “Tell me about ...”, “What are your thoughts on ...?” “How do you feel ...?”

Listen more. Talk less.

It’s tempting ~ and quite natural ~ to offer advice. After all, this is your child and you want to save him/her the anguish of making mistakes you’ve made and taking the ‘wrong’ path (though, as Malcolm Forbes says, “Failure is success if we learn from it”). So, why not ask first to see if they’d like advice? “Would you be interested in hearing about ...?” “May I share something that’s been important in my own career?”

Positive energy begets positive energy

Students are well aware of the economic crisis and its affect on employment. Be realistic, yet keep the conversation upbeat. Encouragement goes much farther than dire warnings. Remind them of their talents, skills, and experience. Discuss the cyclical nature of the economy and the role that networking plays in job search. Today, more than ever, networking is imperative, which is why Career Services connects students to more than 8,000 alumni in the Tufts Career Network (via WebCenter). Likewise, consider asking if your student would like to be introduced to someone in your own network to conduct an informational interview. (Learn about Informational Interviewing at <http://careers.tufts.edu/students/additional/TwoGoldenQuestions.pdf>)

Focus on the 'big picture'

“How much does it pay?” It may be tempting to ask this about a job or potential career; however, it sends a message to your child that salary is the most important factor in career decision-making. There’s no denying its importance, yet keep in mind that salary is only one aspect of a total compensation package. Again, keep the conversation open-ended while you explore the other features of a position or career interest. To ensure that students can experience careers and industries that interest them, Tufts Career Services offers grants for unpaid summer internships. Learn more at <http://careers.tufts.edu/students/internships>.

Invite honesty and openness

Your attitude and expectations set the tone. If your children fear that their career interests may disappoint you, you may not hear what’s on their minds. In our eagerness to maximize our time with adult children at home, our need for information and closure can lead us to do all the talking and inquiry. Take cues from your child. When they open up, let it flow. The less judgmental your response, the more you’ll hear.

To learn about more ways you can support your child’s career development, please visit our parents’ page at <http://careers.tufts.edu/parents>. Here, you’ll find information and resources especially for you, including the Career Services presentation at Parents Weekend. To better understand what’s available to your student, explore <http://careers.tufts.edu>, encourage them to view job and internship postings targeting Tufts students (<http://careers.tufts.edu/TuftsCareerConnect/>), and urge them to read the emails they regularly receive from Career Services.