

Wanted: Crystal Ball

Parenting Strategies – November 2009

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Chances are, during this holiday season or upcoming school break, your children will be asked lots of questions about their academic and career plans, and you might find that you are asked a few too. Students have shared with me, over the years, how it feels uncomfortable to be in social situations and to not have answers when asked about future plans. This is common at family gatherings when people have not seen one another for a period of time and conversations focus on what you've been up to and where you are heading. For the student and parents who already have clarity, it can be an affirming time, but for most families there is a fair amount of uncertainty about your student's goals and path. Think about it: before our children go to college they are asked, "So where are you going to college and what are you going to study?" Once in college they are asked, "So what are you going to major in?" or "What do you want to be?" or "Where are you going to work" or "How are you going to get a job in this economy?" For many students this can be off-putting, because they have not yet figured these questions out. For parents it can feel awkward too. As one of my clients once said, "How can I be spending all this money on education and have a student who seems so uncertain about what he is going to do next?" She went on to share that her son didn't yet have a major, he had no plans yet for the summer -- it was only November -- and she couldn't understand why he was taking subjects in which he wasn't good. Her frustration was palpable and I guided the conversation toward what she thought her son truly needed from her. It was clear to me, from my experience advising students, that her son was right where he needed to be, and that her timeline for what she felt he should figure out by when, was purely that – her timeline.

One of the greatest gifts you can give your children is to provide a bit of wiggle room for them to not have answers, because it is through exploration that they are most likely to find their core interests, skills, and values.

Some strategies to support your child include:

- adopting the perspective that your son or daughter wants to figure things out -- it is the rare individual that really enjoys long periods of uncertainty;
- allowing occasions to explore and experience a wide range of options -- your son or daughter will be more likely to find his or her true interest areas (of which there may be many);
- encouraging opportunities to do things and to not be judged as being good or bad at them -- your son or daughter will be more likely to try new things and widen his or her sphere of options;
- providing support when your son or daughter is curious about something that might be unfamiliar to you -- you will help your child to take risks and expand his or her vision of self;
- creating space for your son or daughter to develop his or her own timeline.

Both high schools and colleges have structures in place that guide students toward or through the next steps and decisions in their education. Most colleges require that students declare a major by spring semester of the sophomore year. High schools have college visiting days and application assistance workshops to signal your child that he or she should be engaged in the college search process. Provided our child is using his or her time well, it is far better for a student to take time to fully explore the possibilities than to make choices simply for the sake of being able to satisfy someone else's need to know. Too numerous to quantify are the times that I met students who came to college certain that they wanted to major in "x" or to become "y," and who were then inspired to take a completely different direction. Surprisingly, sometimes the students who waited until the last minute to make a decision had actually done the most thorough job of evaluating the pros and cons. If waiting until the deadline means a student has gathered the best information to make a solid decision, there is likely little value in making the decision early.

So how can you best equip your children to respond when they feel a barrage of questions coming their way at family gatherings?

Consider the following:

- let your son or daughter know that you are in support of him or her taking time to explore and experience various options;
- share examples that illustrate how you used a period of time wisely to make a significant decision;
- talk about the deadlines that do exist for making academic or career-related decisions and ask your son or daughter what ideas he or she has for getting from Explore to Decide;
- anticipate the questions that you and your child might be asked by well-meaning family members;
- invite your son or daughter to think out loud with you about how he or she would like to respond to questions about his or her next steps, decisions, or future plans;
- share how you intend to answer questions when family members ask you about what your son or daughter is going to study, or where they are going to go to college, and so on;
- remind your student about other times that he or she has taken time to make a good decision;
- have your student consider questions that he or she might ask of family members to learn more about how they made decisions about college, academics, and career;
- encourage your student to think about the pros and cons of making decisions early versus waiting until later;
- think about the questions that you typically ask pre-college and college age family members and acquaintances, and consider how you might reframe them.

With a little forethought, and possibly even a bit of practice through role playing, your son or daughter will feel both confident and comfortable during family gatherings. He or she won't quickly tire of being asked academic and career-related questions, but rather will be able to engage others in the process of his or her decision making.