

College, Career & Life Planning



Questions to Motivate & to Stimulate Thinking

Would You Pick A High School Extracurricular Activity At Random?

Objective: Help students recognize that if it is “dumb” to select a high school activity at random, it is even “dumber” to make a career decision at random because the consequences are far greater.

Procedure: As students enter the classroom, ask them to draw a card at random from a box. Each card has a different high school extracurricular activity (or vacation) printed on it. Announce that the school has decided that the old practice of letting students pick activities is too time consuming and that a new policy has been implemented by which students will be assigned to activities at random. I instruct each student to look at the activity on their card and I begin asking who is assigned to each extracurricular activity. Occasionally, students are happy with their random selection. However, the vast majority of students usually are not. In one class, when I asked who was on the varsity football team, a petite girl who didn’t weigh more than 80 lbs. raised her hand. I asked what position she would play. “Tackle”, she replied. The class roared with laughter. When I asked who had been assigned to the cheerleading squad, a guy weighing at least 230 lbs. raised his hand. Again, the class burst into laughter. I then asked, is it wise to choose a high school extracurricular activity at random?

Comments: Students are very vocal about the random approach. Typical comments include “Dumb” or “Stupid” or “Worst approach I have ever heard of”. Next I ask, “So what would you do if we let you choose an activity?” The student response is usually fast and specific. “We’d watch the activity.” “We’d talk to other students who do that activity.” “We’d choose something that we are interested in.” “We’d figure out the skills required to be successful at the activity and choose something that we are good at because if you are good at something, it is more fun.” “Exactly”, I reply. “So wouldn’t it be smart to do the same thing when making a career decision? After all, if you made a poor decision about a high school activity, it would have a minimal impact on your life. If you make a poor career decision, it will impact your happiness and job satisfaction. It may even determine whether you keep your job and put food on the table for your family.”

Note: You can perform the above exercise with a wide variety of other decisions (e.g. choosing vacations, girl/boy friend) to which students can relate.

How Much Value Does This (Crumpled Paper Bag) Have?

Objective: Convey the message that career planning has significant value that may be difficult for students to recognize. Send a message that the career tools on this web site, if used, will be very valuable to each student.

Procedure: Place an item of significant value (e.g. gold coin, \$100 bill) in a crumpled paper bag. Hold up the bag and ask the students if it appears to have any value.

Comment: Student responses typically include: “No” or “You can recycle it” and, sometimes “It depends on what’s in it.” I indicate that there are some things in life with significant value, but it is difficult to see. For example, career planning. I pull from the crumpled bag a 1-ounce pure gold, U.S. Proof Eagle coin and pass it around for the students to look at. I indicate that the coin is worth about \$700. When you look at this gold coin and think about its value, I want you to remember my next comment. “If you use the career planning tools that you are introduced to today, they will be worth far more to you than the value of this gold coin.” I then ask, “If I brought in a whole bag of these gold coins and gave them away for free, how many of you would want one?” All hands go up. “I hope I get the same response for these career planning tools.”

Why Do You Go To School?

Objective: Help students realize that they go to school to learn skills (social, education, moral) that will help them become self-sufficient, contributing members of society (largely via their career).

Comments: Initial student responses include: “Because my parents make me.” “Because it is the law.” “To learn.” With each response, I ask “Why?” Why do your parents make you? Why is it the law? Why do you need to learn? Soon they realize, a primary objective of school is to prepare them for a career.

How Many Hours Do You Spend In School From Grades 1-12?

Objective: Help students realize that they are “investing”, not just “passing” time in school. Help students conceptualize how much time they will spend in a career and appreciate the implications of the career decision.

Comments: Initial student responses include: “Too much”, “Forever” or “Hundreds of Hours”. Some students attempt to calculate the answer. After a few guesses, I tell them that the answer is about 14,000 hours. Usually, there are a few gasps. Next, I ask the students to think about all that time and multiple it by (6) six. That is how much time you will spend in your career. More gasps. In school, you take math, science, social studies, history, art, etc. Your career is like taking one subject. Now think about getting up every day for the next 40 years and going to work 8, 10 or 12 hours per day doing the same subject. More gasps. “You better enjoy your occupation!”

How Many Hours Should You Invest In Planning Your Career?

Objective: Help students to realize that given the huge investment of time in prepare for and engaging in a career, it is wise to invest at least a very small fraction of that amount of time to make an informed decision.

Comments: I usually phrase the questions in this way: “Given that you’ll spend 14,000 hours preparing for “it” (your career), not counting college, and 85,000+ hours engaged in “it” a total of about 100,000 hours of your life, how many hours should you invest deciding what “it” is?

Comments: I ask students to invest at least 40 hours over the course of their four years in high school performing career evaluation/planning.

When Are You Required To Make Your Career Decision?

Objective: Illustrate why the career decision is so easy to procrastinate and that some people never make an informed decision. Rather, for many adults, the career journey is decided by chance.

Comments: I ask, “Are you required to decide when you are a sophomore in high school?” “How about a senior?” “Are you required to decide when you are a senior in college?” Some student will likely say yes to each of these questions. I inform them that most of the students that I teach at the University of South Florida are seniors and that many of them have not decided on a career. I also indicate that some of my students just plan to continue to work for the company they joined to earn some \$\$ for college. There was a job opening and they took it. I ask, “Is that making an informed decision?” Most students understand that it is not. “Are you required to make a career decision when you get your first job? Your second?” By this time the students understand that you are never required to make a career decision and that some people never do. Instead, they wonder through life reacting when forced to by random events (e.g. job opening, lay-off, plant closing, firing).

What Is The Best Job In The World?

Objective: Help students recognize that the best career choice depends on each individual’s needs, interest and abilities. There is no “absolute best” career.

Comments: Typical student responses include: “To be retired” or “To win the lottery” or “To be a movie star” or “To be a professional athlete”. For each career nominated, I ask the class, “Who thinks this is the world’s best career?” The entire class never agrees on the “best” career. At some point, a student responds: “It depends on each person. Each person’s strengths, interests and needs are different.” The class agrees. This is a great lead-in to the first step in the career planning process: Identify your strengths, interests and needs.

What Information Is Needed To Make An Informed Career Decision?

Objective: Demonstrate how easily and quickly students can obtain the information required to evaluate career options by using the web site.

Procedure: While on-line at www.collegecareerlifeplanning.com , I go to the document showing the careers forecasted to have the “most openings”. Note: You could use any one of several other documents on the web site for this illustration. I ask for a student volunteer and ask the class: “What information is needed to make an informed career decision?”

Comments: Student responses tend to come slow, but usually include, “How much money you make.” I ask, would it also be helpful to know: growth rate, job openings, education required, working conditions, skills required, tasks performed, etc. Everyone agrees, that all of this information would be great. Next I ask, “How long would it take (name of student volunteer) to obtain all of that information for just one job?” Typical students replies include “A long time” or “Several Hours” or “Several Days”. Next, I ask someone in the room to start timing. I instruct the volunteer to double click on an occupation (e.g. nursing), click on our state (e.g. Florida), click on “Select All” and “Update”, and finally click on Printer-friendly version. “Time”, I shout. “35 seconds”, the student tracking time responds. Next, I scan down the document to show the students that all the information that we said was required to help make an informed career decision is provided by the document. I emphasize that the information is free and it can be retrieved very quickly. However, the student must decide whether to invest the time to read and use it.