Stories of Debt and Service: On the Brink of Employment

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol48/iss1/16
I hear you saying that you’re scared—that you expected to have something lined up by now, and the goal of having a job by graduation is looking less and less likely. I wonder, though, whether it’s possible to both make some concrete progress on your search and also to be intentional as you do so.

It’s springtime once again. From my perch on Georgetown University’s hilltop campus I notice a familiar rhythm of conversation in my career counseling appointments. It’s normal not to have a job by May; though hiring of new college graduates will be up at least nine percent over last year’s numbers, only a third of the nation’s class of 2014 had a job lined up at graduation. College unemployment spikes every summer with the arrival of recent graduates and drops in the fall as the market creates space for new professionals. Accordingly, some of my students have a clear sense of what they’re looking for but just haven’t yet sealed the deal.

Others will simply tell me that they’re lost—that they’re not sure how to apply their learning in and out of the classroom to a professional setting, nor are they able to articulate what sort of lives exercise to tell your story: “I enjoy researching, writing, and problem solving, and I like being in small-group environments. Where can I see opportunities like this?”

- Make a list of nine lives—job titles or more general descriptors—that you would be drawn to if you had the necessary training, enough money, and the blessing of those most important to you. What themes do you see? Which ideas are you most drawn to? What holds you back from pursuing these things unabashedly? What information do you need, and who can provide it?
- Consider what or who has been helpful to you during other seasons of uncertainty or transition. How could you employ similar strategies or connect with supportive peers or mentors? As you connect with people to ask for their insight and help, use the themes you identified in the nine helpful things.
- Find at least one friend who is also searching and connect regularly to share encouragement, strategies, and accountability.
- Set up a routine to provide structure for your job search and breaks from the grind. For some students, this will look like mornings spent on research and afternoons on applications and conversations. For others, it means that Sundays will involve no job searching whatsoever.

Helpful Ideas

A student who is thinking about next steps should consider which of the following ideas to try:

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- Consider what or who has been helpful to you during other seasons of uncertainly or transition. How could you employ similar strategies or connect with supportive peers or mentors? As you connect with people to ask for their insight and help, use the themes you identified in the nine helpful things.
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setting would be a good fit. Often these students are pursuing the combination of “as perfect as possible” and “as soon as possible.” Conflicting narratives of “perfect” or “success” swirl around them, informed by a board room of peers, professors, family, cultural and gender norms, faith traditions, or financial pressures; and it can be easy to lose one’s unique story or sense of direction in the noise.

I also notice a heightened expectation among students that their first job will define their professional identity in a permanent way. If they don’t get it right, they imagine long-lasting negative consequences. And as they try to get it right, students can experience paralysis centered on the convergence of endless information about options and the sense that no job description seems to fit their interests and skills exactly. They constantly feel behind.

I wonder, though, whether it’s possible both to make some concrete progress on your search and also to be intentional as you do so. My words find their roots in the Jesuit idea of contemplation in action. While it’s tempting to shoot from the hip when one’s graduation date is looming or is past – ten applications a day, no, twenty if I don’t write a cover letter – the wisest and most productive steps forward will usually be informed by intentional reflection.

Progress and intentionalty look different for everyone. There are a number of possible next steps to fit different individuals’ needs. I suggest some helpful ideas in the accompanying boxed text.

Meanwhile, what about your bills? Signing up to work for a temp agency or finding another stopgap option can provide stability as well as a professional experience that could further inform your reflection process. St. Ignatius encourages us to pray the Examen consistently, whether we feel completely lost or as though we’ve arrived. As contemplation forms your next steps, those steps will give you new ideas and experiences upon which to reflect. Soon enough you may come to value the ongoing journey as much as or even more than the first destination. Hang in there!

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Wheeling Jesuit MoJo

Every Friday evening at 5:15pm, around 30-40 people leave the campus of Wheeling Jesuit University to travel to the “rough part of town,” where members of the Mother Jones House have prepared a community dinner. Professors, campus ministers, neighbors, and fellow students gather together for weekly fellowship and a shared meal, while the six house residents ensure people feel welcomed and well-fed. First glance would show amateur cooks bustling around, but if you stay long enough you will see the rich community that has formed around six friends who have chosen a distinctive way of living out our Jesuit mission.

We are the Mother Jones House, an intentional community of undergraduate students whose everyday life is focused around six pillars: faith, community, simplicity, social justice, learning, and service. The house is a close partnership between Wheeling Jesuit University and Laughlin Memorial Chapel, an after-school program for neighborhood students. We also work closely with Catholic Charities Neighborhood Center to deliver meals to homebound individuals. Our service sites and neighbors have become just as familiar to us as our campus and classmates.

We have chosen to live in community at “MoJo,” as we affectionately call it, for a variety of reasons. MoJo offers a chance to get away from the chaotic atmosphere of campus and serves as a home away from home. Our interest in MoJo partially stemmed out of a restlessness acquired from our Jesuit education. Immersing ourselves in the reality of our neighborhood has inspired us to