

# Parents' Guide to College and Careers: How to Help, Not Hover

Book Review by Mark Veronica

An experienced career counselor and college academic advisor, Barbara Cooke presents a practical, straightforward approach to guiding teens toward satisfying careers. She proficiently counters the helicopter parent effect by advising parents how to help their teens consider college and career options in a cooperative and constructive way without micromanaging. As a high school counselor and a parent of college and high school students myself, I can verify the value of her wise insight into college and career planning.

Her no-nonsense approach is consistent with the model put forth by Frank Parsons, known as "The Father of Guidance." Parsons suggested that the three stages of career planning include: understanding oneself, understanding the available educational options and job market choices, and considering their interrelationship. Cooke's career planning model begins with a self-assessment of skills, interests, and values. She emphasizes networking and informational interviewing to learn about the job market by getting first-hand impressions. She advocates for conducting research to assess potential jobs that would be a good fit with one's values and preferences.

Cooke effectively challenges some widely held misconceptions about careers. She provides a good analysis of job market changes over the past generation. She prudently advises students and parents to spend as much time and energy researching careers as they do researching colleges. A college plan is not a career plan, she points out. With wisdom emerging from her cumulative experiences working with families, she reminds parents that, "your goal is not to persuade your child to choose the career you would like him to choose [nor] the career you wish you had chosen" (p. 31).

Cooke provides a good explanation of *specific-content majors*, which teach skills leading to one particular job title (i.e. accounting or engineering), contrasted with *transferable skills majors*, which teach more general functional and adaptive skills that develop intellectual capacities (i.e. communicating through writing and speaking, research, coordinating projects, etc.) and prepare students for further training. She points out that most jobs are only indirectly connected to a college major, and that, "for many jobs, work experience trumps college major" (p. 69). The keys for liberal arts graduates, she points out, are to be more resourceful in identifying places to work and more effective in marketing their transferable skills.

I also like how Cooke tries to help students understand the long-term implications of debt. She encourages students to consider the marketability of a major before determining how much is safe to borrow. To emphasize the importance of planning, she projects the cost of each additional semester spent as an undecided major and extrapolates the cost of the "five year plan." She refers to opting out of math early as "an expensive mistake" which leads to taking costly, non-credit bearing, program-delaying remedial courses in college.

While there are many good points in the chapter, "Navigating Through High School," I am puzzled why it is located so late in a book geared primarily for high school parents. The chapter opens by stating that a rigorous course of study in high school is the most effective way to contain the cost of college. It then contradicts this by emphasizing potential disadvantages of earning college credit in high school, questioning whether the course will count and whether the student will be prepared to compete at the next level. It is interesting that a college advisor takes a surprisingly cautious approach to high school students taking college level courses. High school counselors often recommend advanced courses

when appropriate because that is what college admissions officers like to see on transcripts. Successful completion of advanced courses proves to admissions committees, and to the students themselves, that they can handle college level work. An International Baccalaureate or Advanced Placement exam costs a fraction of the tuition for the same course in college. Acceptable scores can satisfy general education requirements and earn college credit. For capable students, the benefits outweigh the risks.

Similarly, Cooke presents remarkably restrained advice about college graduates with no career plan going to graduate school. She does not automatically promote the idea that if some education is good, then more must be better. Planning is crucial. "Career planning is about how education plays out in the job market" (p. 169).

Cooke's concluding chapter provides an excellent summary. I am impressed with her reminder that, "there is a goal beyond getting into college. It is getting out of college and getting on with a happy, productive adult life" (p. 168). The author's website contains links to several useful career planning resources. She finishes on a positive note: "There will always be opportunities for educated, energetic, hard-working young adults who have good communication skills and a willingness to learn" (p. 170).

Another feature of this book that I am pleased to see is the emphasis on the importance of parents and students staying in touch with their high school counselor throughout the planning process. I counted at least seven references to school counselors, often imploring students and parents to meet, talk to, involve, and work closely with their school counselor. It certainly makes sense to utilize this free and convenient professional service available right at school.

I recommend Cooke's guidebook for parents looking to collaboratively help their teen make college and career plans.

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