

Options and Opportunities – Tool #3: Gaining Experience

While employers are going to look at your major and GPA when making hiring decisions, **they will also want to see that you have practical experience where you have developed skills that are relevant to the workplace.** This experience may include: internships, co-ops, research, student teaching, campus involvement, service-learning, volunteering, military service, personal projects, entrepreneurship or others. Whether you undertake these experiences as part of your academic work (i.e., for credit) or not, you will learn valuable skills, have significant experiences for your resume and stand out to future employers. Make the most of your time in college to explore several different opportunities to better understand what is important to you in a job and have concrete examples of ways you have demonstrated your strengths and skills in various settings.

Research

While you may have encountered a sampling of experimental work in your courses, engaging in a sustained research experience over a summer or several semesters will provide you with a better understanding of what it might be like to engage in research as a career. In fact, most students who gain undergraduate research do so by working with a faculty member, often for course credits or as a volunteer. Paid research experiences are also possible, but this varies depending on lab and department. A research experience, even if it's only for a semester, is critical if you hope to attend graduate school. A research experience can enhance your communication skills, strengthen concepts learned in the classroom, and provide project based examples of your skills for your resume.

To start this process begin by reviewing the department webpages to learn about the research areas of different faculty. Then, approach one or several faculty by asking to talk about their research. Be sure to have done your homework on their specialties in advance. Bring a copy of your CV or resume with you in case you are asked for it. If the research projects within the lab appear to be interesting to you, it is appropriate to inquire about if there any openings with the lab.

Faculty can also guide you toward other opportunities, on- and off-campus, that align with your specific interests. If you elect to apply for a competitive program like an REU, you should be prepared to spend a significant time on your application. It will likely include a resume, personal statement, transcripts and letters of recommendation.

Internships & Co-ops

Internships and co-ops are supervised, structured learning experiences in a professional setting related to your field of study. Most internships last at least one semester and require a regular weekly commitment. Internships can be either full-time or part-time. Summer is often the most popular time for students to intern. Co-ops are a unique subset of internships that require you to alternate semesters between full-time work and full-time study. Co-op students will typically take more than 4 years to graduate, but these students are also often offered full-time employment with their co-op organization after graduation. Many colleges offer the opportunity for students to earn independent study credit for internships and co-ops. Check it out!

Finding an internship or co-op is a similar process to seeking a full-time job. You will need to seek out opportunities, have a resume, and may go on interviews. Consider using many of the tools outlined in this book to help you narrow your options and secure opportunities. Your college career center should also be a valuable resource for you

Also, don't forget to check out jobs.spsnational.org for possible positions in your local area and across the nation. SPS Jobs hosts not only jobs but internships, REUs, and co-ops!

Campus Involvement

Leadership in any campus organization, particularly national groups like the Society of Physics Students, is likely to impress employers. Consider ways you make an impact through your leadership and be sure to document your efforts and their results. This may be by recruiting members, organizing or improving an event, impacting a campus policy or developing a system to help a group run more efficiently.

Many campuses will host a student organization fair at the beginning of each school year or the start of the semester. Take advantage of these opportunities to see what exists and where you might like to get involved. Don't take this too far though! Employers would rather see you commit yourself to a small number of organizations where you are truly making a difference than see you spread too thin.

Volunteering and Service-Learning

Engaging in service to your community is an important part of being a citizen, however, it's also a way to enhance your employability. Consider investing your time in opportunities and organizations that can make the most of your interests and

skills. This goes beyond simply participating in a one-time 5k or a fundraiser. Find out what happens behind the scenes and how you can participate in the planning and execution of activities. Making the time and effort to see a service project through to completion is strong evidence for an employer that you will be an asset to their organization. A non-profit may be excited about your beginner skills with web pages or database and offer you more chances to hone and grow them than you would find in a private sector company.

Don't forget - outreach done with your SPS chapter is an important form of service!

Personal Projects and Entrepreneurship

Have you designed a web page, built an app, written a blog, built a robot or maybe even started a small business? These experiences and others where you apply your skills toward a project or larger outcome are outstanding examples of ways to foster the attributes employers are seeking. Taking initiative, securing resources, persevering through challenges and striving toward excellence are key elements of these experiences and invaluable to any employer.

Student Teaching and Teaching Assistantships

Interested in teaching as a career? Many departments often employ students to help within classrooms, grade coursework, or provide tutoring services. Inquire with your adviser and department about these opportunities. They are a great way to not only increase your knowledge of the topic, but also foreshadow a possible career in education. Teaching roles as an undergrad provide you with a way to not only learn the material but test drive careers. Also, consider tutoring, physics help labs, and serving teaching courses.

Exercise - Tool #3: Gaining Experience

Recall the key words related to the job titles you identified on page 14. These are likely the skills that employers will be seeking when considering candidates. For each key word, brainstorm experiences you can undertake to develop and enhance that skill.

Keyword: <i>ex. Communication</i>	Keyword:	Keyword:	Keyword:	Keyword:
Experiences to try: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Present my research at the campus research festival • Write about an SPS outreach event in the SPS Observer • Help my SPS chapter apply for a grant SPS chapter award • Judge a science fair • Present Physics demos to a local school • Present a journal article to SPS chapter 	Experiences to try:	Experiences to try:	Experiences to try:	Experiences to try: