

Who Knew the Job of a Prosecutor Looks Nothing Like "Law & Order?"

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Zina Kumok, 26, has learned a thing or two about personal finance – the hard way. When she graduated from Indiana University in 2011 with a journalism degree, she was saddled with \$28,000 worth of student-loan [debt](#) that she had to pay off on her own, and on the starting salary of a journalist, which was only about \$28,000 a year. She now writes regularly about personal finance for Knowledge@Wharton High School. Here, she discusses the power of career exploration before you go to college.

When I was 16, I decided to be a sports writer. Instead of waiting until college to begin studying journalism, I shadowed local sportscasters, started a sports section in my school newspaper, attended seminars on sports writing and subscribed to several publications. I could have waited until college to start experiencing aspects of my career interests, but I learned so much in those two years of pre-college journalism immersion.

If there's something you're interested in, whether it's sports writing, medicine or art, find a way to explore that interest in high school. Contact local experts in those fields and ask if you can shadow them. Look into internship opportunities. Research suggests that future employers especially value internship experience – often even more than your college GPA. Most professionals benefited from networking when they were starting out and are happy to help others who are considering their future job prospects. Explain who you are, why you're contacting them and prepare some questions to ask them about their day-to-day lives.

It's important to get experience before starting your degree, so you know if you'll actually enjoy the work. Here are a few reasons you should experiment with various professions before you graduate from high school:

Money for College!

It could improve your scholarship eligibility. If you know what you want to do, you can find professional organizations that provide college aid to high school students who've expressed interest in that field. Some of these might be local chapters of national groups. Others might be from your college. For example, the Public Relations Student Society of America offers more than 12 scholarships for undergrad and graduate students. Are you into technology? Then check out the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers to research its scholarships, grants and fellowships. These are just two of many.

Some colleges offer additional scholarships once you have enrolled. I continued to receive aid while I was in school, because I wrote for the college newspaper and excelled in that field. The earlier you start identifying your passion, the farther ahead you'll be when you graduate.

You'll Know If It's the Right Career for You

You can find out quickly if a job isn't for you. In 8th grade, I spent Career Day shadowing a local prosecutor. Before that, I dreamed of going to law school and getting the "bad guys" off the streets. After spending a full day with the assistant district attorney, I decided that career wasn't for me.

No matter what you're interested in, you need to try it on for size. See what it's really like. My image of the life of a prosecutor came right out of TV's "Law & Order." Instead, it involved far more reading and research than exciting courtroom drama. That's a good lesson for all of us: TV dramas are seldom a true reflection of careers. How fun would they be to watch if someone sat in the library or behind a paper-scattered desk all day?

You Can Choose a Better School

If you know what you're interested in, you can choose a college that better fits your needs. You'll know if you need to attend a certain school for your chosen major or if your in-state public school will meet your needs. Because I knew I wanted to study journalism, I only applied to schools that had strong communications programs. I ended up at Indiana University, which is well known for preparing young journalists.

However, this advice comes with a note of caution. It's probably smart not to limit yourself too much in your college choice. College should be a time of discovery and exploration, as much as book learning and career prep. You don't want to get so fixed on a particular track that it requires more time and potentially hundreds of thousands of more dollars in tuition to pivot.

Lots of 18-year-olds change their minds about the careers they want to pursue! Nobody is asking you to choose your life course while you're in high school. But with a little exploration, you can certainly start figuring out the types of careers that fit your talents and your interests. It will also help you begin to define your own personal brand and give you more confidence to communicate your skill set to others.