

## **Now, the Real Test**

### **College Grads Turn to Tests, Life Coaches For Help in Deciding What Comes Next**

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College graduation day. Finals safely behind you. Time to take the first steps of the rest of your life. But first, how about one more test or counseling session, to tell you where to direct those steps?

Instead of rushing off to grad school or into the workforce, students graduating from college this spring are increasingly turning to personality tests and life coaches, say some career counselors, to match them with jobs that promise not just earning potential but a compatible lifestyle and a shot at happiness.

"You used to see a kid who had a father and mother who were both lawyers, so the kid thought they're supposed to go on and be a lawyer," says Jeffrey Hayes, co-president of CPP, publisher of two widely used personality and interest assessments -- the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and the Strong Interest Inventory. "But today, people come in and say, 'I don't want to be like my mom and dad. I want to do something that I really enjoy. I don't just want to work for a paycheck. I want to know more about myself.' "

Two years ago, in response to requests from college career counseling offices, the company began offering workshops on how to use its assessment tools to guide the job-search process; Hayes says workshop attendance has since doubled to about 4,000.

New grads' caution may spring in part from limited experience with introspection, some counselors say. This is a generation so focused on achieving, they say, that the graduates haven't stopped much to dwell on who they are or what they want. Grads also voice uncertainty about long-term job trends and want something with impact beyond being able to pay the mortgage.

"[This generation] wants work to be meaningful, and as a result they go into the workplace in order to find something that's not just a job, but really is a form of self-expression," says psychologist Jeffrey Arnett, author of "Emerging Adulthood." "That's not exactly what the job market is set up to handle. It's not like employers create jobs thinking, 'Gee, whom can I fulfill today?'"

At the LeBow College of Business at Drexel University in Philadelphia, organizational psychologist Jonathan Ziegert says he sees more and more students complete a battery of psychological tests before launching a job search. The campus trend mirrors a change in the broader job market, he says, where he sees the job hunt turning increasingly into an exercise in self-searching.

For students seeking answers to some pretty big questions -- Who am I? What might I like to do with my life? -- before leaving the college cocoon, some point to college itself for making the process so alien. "To get into college, it's best to be president of five clubs; being a jack-of-all-trades is very much rewarded and encouraged," says Allison Aboud, who counsels some newly minted grads as a life coach in Washington. "But what's missing is the reflective piece."

"I've had a client who is good at everything, a super overachiever. She loved getting involved on campus in pretty much everything. She came in [for career advice] and was completely lost," Aboud says. "At school, you can do a lot without necessarily reflecting on how much you enjoy what you're doing."

Thanks to the momentum of the positive psychology movement, says Aboud, new grads express no shame at seeking professional help with soul-searching. They describe counseling or coaching as a tool to help them move forward.

**That's what Melissa Brown thought when she approached her 2006 college graduation with no firm career plans in hand.**

**"Pretty much most of my friends at some point have had some sort of advice or help or therapy or coaching," says Brown, a 21-year-old who studied communications at the University of California at Berkeley. "There might be less of a stigma attached to coaching because you're not going in there and talking about deep dark secrets."**

**In the fall of her senior year, Brown called life coach Amber Rosenberg in San Francisco for help navigating her post-collegiate decision-making. Brown ruled out a quick jump to grad school -- "It would have almost been too easy -- and a mistake" -- and started talking work. But instead of debating the merits of dental benefits and flextime, she and Rosenberg explored her "core strengths," such as challenge and perseverance.**

**"I've had friends and siblings who have changed their jobs a million times, and I really wanted to find something that was a good fit for me and really make a conscious decision," she says.**

**By April, she had found a job that played to her strengths -- working as a child advocate at a domestic violence agency in San Francisco. She says she loves her job - - and that it draws on those personal traits that she and Rosenberg identified. "During the job search, I was thinking more about . . . what really motivated me and gave me energy, and that was honesty and bravery. So I interviewed and applied to a lot of jobs at nonprofits," she says.**

**Pleased with her experience, Brown says she has referred others to Rosenberg. "I just get the sense that among my friends, who tend to be really motivated and really driven, moving in this direction is a competitive advantage," she says.**

Some of this may be pragmatic thinking, in a time of rapid workplace change, says Mitchell Marks, an organizational psychologist whose research covers employees' connections to their employers.

This is a generation, he says, that has "just erased the word loyalty from work. They grew up at dinner tables where mommies and daddies were downsized and went through mergers. The notion of womb-to-tomb employment is completely foreign to them. They want the best job for themselves now, because who knows what will happen down the road?"

Some companies are trying to reintroduce that notion of loyalty by playing to job-seekers' strengths, says Tom Rath of the Gallup Organization. Rath is co-author of the latest version of Gallup's best-selling StrengthsFinder series, a book and online assessment tool taken by more than 2 million people since its 1999 introduction. The test does more than point job-seekers in the right direction; it's a hiring perk as well. Some employers do appear to ask, "Gee, whom can I fulfill today?"

"At Gallup we get more and more requests from kids who are graduating asking what companies do we work with that have really built strength-based organizations," Rath says. "It's almost turned into a huge recruiting ploy for employers: If you go to work at Toyota and Best Buy, we'll help you work on your strengths. It's a great way to attract applicants."