

Question Your Sources as You Explore Career Options

Ask a question and you're a fool for three minutes; do not ask a question and you're a fool for the rest of your life.

Chinese proverb

Suppose you are in the market for an inexpensive used car and you run into me, the proud owner of a 1994 Nissan Sentra with nearly 200,000 miles on it (which is actually true, by the way). “It’s a great runner,” I tell you, “and I have taken very good care of it over the years. I have changed the oil faithfully every 3,000 miles, and I have followed the owner’s manual to the letter when it comes to taking the car in for its scheduled maintenance. It gets close to 40 miles a gallon on the highway, it has very little rust, and all of the major components are in good working condition. The only reason I am selling it is because it’s really just too small for me.” (I am 6 feet, 4 inches tall.)

I am asking \$1,100 for the car. “That is its blue-book value,” I say. So you hand over your \$1,100 immediately and buy the car, right?

Of course not! You are not even close to making a decision yet. Instead you will undoubtedly:

Ask to Take the Car for a Test Drive. You will want to spend a half hour or more taking the car through its paces, both on the city streets and on the highway. Does the car shimmy once you go beyond 50 miles per hour? Do the brakes feel good? Does the car make strange or annoying sounds as it is going down the road?

Take the Car to a Mechanic You Trust. For \$50, your professional-mechanic friend will inspect any car you bring to him,

from bow to stern, top to bottom. He will look for flaws major and minor—particularly dangerous leaks, loose connections, and anything else that might spell disaster down the road (literally and figuratively).

Call Your Friend, the Owner of a '96 Sentra. One of your close friends from high school drives a slightly newer Sentra. You want to talk to her to find out what kind of luck she has had with it, what major repairs she has had to make and at what cost, and whether she would buy another Sentra again or not.

Go Online to Research the Car. You will jump on the Internet to first check out the car's book value according to several sources. Then you will do a Google search to find a few online user groups made up of people who have firsthand experience—both good and bad—with Sentras. You decide to post a question seeking opinions about the purchase you have in mind.

You may even go so far as to ask a reference librarian to help you find articles about the car. You are aware that several magazines publish annual features on the best used cars to buy. You want to see if the Sentra showed up in any of those articles.

In other words, no matter how honest and knowledgeable I might seem where my '94 Nissan Sentra is concerned, you know better than to take me at my word about the car, for I may well be dishonest about it, unknowledgeable about it, or both. You have no way of knowing one way or the other, and you would be stupid to risk it given the fact that you will be spending \$1,100 of your hard-earned cash just to buy the car, to say nothing of the money you will have to invest to maintain it in the years to come.

Common sense tells you that you just do not buy a used car based solely on the claims of its owner, even if that owner is completely honest (like me). Instead, you go to outside people and resources first to see if the owner's claims mesh with reality. Like a good journalist, you check out your source—me, in this

case—and make sure he is reliable and accurate before you go and drop \$1,100 on his car.

Sadly, too many college students—I was one of them—misplace this same type of common sense when they are exploring college majors and careers. All it takes sometimes is one snide comment from a roommate or the friend of a friend to convince you that your career idea is hopelessly ridiculous. The conversation might go something like this:

You: I'm thinking of majoring in anthropology.

Roommate: Are you crazy? You will never get a job with that!

You: Hmmm ... maybe I should major in something else, then.

If you are like most college students, you never stop to consider that your roommate knows as much about anthropology and the anthropological job market as a paper towel does. He sounds like he is an expert; why would he be so vocal with his opinion, after all? So he must be worth listening to. And so, sadly, you do listen, and you take your career exploration elsewhere.

The media, television and movies in particular, can have this same type of impact on your career exploration activities. In 2005, NBC *Tonight Show* host Jay Leno was taken to task by Betty Young, the president of Northwest State Community College in Ohio, who was tired of hearing the late-night comedian's less-than-flattering jokes about the academic rigor of community colleges and the abilities of community college students. She was concerned enough to ride her Harley-Davidson to Los Angeles in an attempt to meet with Leno personally. Being joked about in front of a national television audience is enough to make any student reconsider his or her plan to pursue a degree of some sort at a two-year institution, notwithstanding the fact that many graduates of community and technical colleges find careers that are quite satisfying.

So as you explore majors and careers, challenge the sources of your information, especially the people sources. Who, for example, is really the most knowledgeable person when it comes to career possibilities with an anthropology degree: your roommate, or a regional officer of the American Anthropological Association? What is the best way for you to get an accurate picture of a career in crime scene investigation: watching *CSI: Miami*, or talking to a local crime scene investigator who has worked in the field for 20 years?

You need not travel thousands of miles on a motorcycle to ask the kinds of tough questions that will help you choose the right road.

Highlight This: Your sources of career information—especially the people sources—may or may not be accurate and reliable. Treat them all with healthy skepticism.