

## HEARN CONSULTING

- Now What?
- The Post-Graduation Playbook — Navigating the transition from college to your first chapter as a working adult.
- TRANSITION GUIDE
- Bryan Hearn, Ed.D. · [www.hearn.consulting](http://www.hearn.consulting)

# WHAT'S INSIDE

The Day After Graduation — Managing the emotional shift and loss of structure

Assessing Where You Are — Skills inventory and degree-to-career alignment

Job Search Strategy — Timeline, networking, and application tracking

Graduate School: Is It Right for You? — Decision framework and next steps

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Building Your Professional Identity — LinkedIn, credentials, and mentorship

Navigating Your First Job — Culture, managing up, and asking for feedback

When Things Don't Go as Planned — Rejection, pivoting, and gap years

Mental Health & Wellbeing — Post-college adjustment and building adult friendships

Your 90-Day Post-Graduation Plan — First-quarter action steps

## 01

- The Day After Graduation

Graduation is surreal. Four years of structure — classes, schedules, communities, clear benchmarks of progress — ends abruptly. You go from being 'a senior' to being 'a graduate,' and the identity shift is real, whether you acknowledge it or not.

What you're experiencing is normal. Many people describe the weeks after graduation as a strange combination of relief, loss, excitement, and emptiness. The relief is obvious: no more exams, papers, or the pressure to 'get in' to the next thing. But the loss is easy to overlook. You've just said goodbye to a community of people you saw daily, a routine that shaped your entire day, and an identity that took four years to develop.

### What You Might Feel

Emotion	What It Feels Like
<b>Freedom</b>	The absence of structured obligations can feel amazing. No deadlines unless you set them. No 8 a.m. classes. Time is suddenly yours to direct.
<b>Emptiness</b>	For the first time in years, there's no obvious next milestone. No 'freshman year' or 'junior projects.' The path is less clear, and that's unsettling.
<b>Loss of Identity</b>	You've defined yourself as a student for nearly your entire conscious life. That label is gone. The question 'What do you do?' now requires a different answer.
<b>FOMO</b>	Your friends are scattered. Some are starting jobs, some are traveling, some are moving. There's a sense that everyone else knows what they're doing.
<b>Optimism</b>	You've achieved something significant. College is done. You have options ahead. This excitement is real and worth acknowledging.

### First Month Priorities

Don't try to have everything figured out in July. Give yourself permission to do some of these things in the first month:

Rest. You've earned it. The first 1–2 weeks after graduation, taking a break is not laziness, it's recovery.

Stay connected to people. Graduation scatters your community. Make concrete plans to stay in touch before momentum dies: regular video calls, visits, group chats.

Reflect, don't panic. You don't need a full five-year plan in week one. But start asking questions: What did college teach you about yourself? What do you want your next chapter to prioritize?

Handle logistics. Update your address with employers, set up your insurance, begin organizing financial documents. These aren't glamorous, but they're foundational.

Explore without committing. If you have the freedom, travel, read, volunteer, work a part-time job. You don't need to know your 'forever career' yet.

**THIS IS A TRANSITION, NOT A CRISIS**  
Every adult you know has been where you are. The disorientation is temporary. The structure will come back — you'll create it. This feeling of unmoored-ness is actually an opportunity to be intentional about what comes next.

**What is one emotion you're experiencing right now about graduation and the transition ahead? Be honest with yourself.**

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**What are you most looking forward to about not being a student? What will you miss the most?**

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**02**

- Assessing Where You Are

Before you can move forward intentionally, you need to understand what you're working with. This is not about judgment — it's about inventory. What skills do you have? How does your degree connect to the career you think you want? What are the gaps?

**Skills Inventory**

Your degree is not your only skillset. Think expansively about what college taught you:

<b>Technical Skills</b>	<b>Languages, software, data analysis, design, writing, research methods. Anything that requires specific training or tools.</b>
<b>Transferable Skills</b>	Communication, project management, leadership, problem-solving, adaptability, working under deadline. These matter in almost any job.
<b>Domain Knowledge</b>	What you learned in your major. For an English major, this might be textual analysis and argumentation. For a biology major, it's experimental design.
<b>Work Experience</b>	Internships, part-time jobs, freelance work, volunteer roles. What did you actually do? What did you learn about yourself as a worker?
<b>Soft Skills</b>	How you show up in groups. Can you listen? Admit mistakes? Follow through? Lead without commanding? These are harder to articulate but often more important.

**List 5–10 technical or specialized skills you have. How did you develop each one?**


**Think of a time you felt competent and proud of your work in college. What did you do well? What skills did that require?**


**Degree-to-Career Alignment**

Not every degree leads to an obvious career. Some majors (engineering, nursing) have clearer paths. Others (philosophy, history, communications) require more intentional translation. Understanding where you fit in your degree's ecosystem matters.

Degree Type	What It Means
<b>Direct-to-Career Majors</b>	If your degree is in nursing, accounting, or computer science, there's a clear pipeline. Your advantage: clear job titles and career ladders.
<b>Flexible-Path Majors</b>	If you studied business, psychology, or English, there's no single 'next step.' Your degree opens multiple doors. Your advantage: flexibility. Your challenge: you need to be intentional.
<b>Specialized Majors</b>	If you studied classics, music composition, or molecular biology, your path depends on your goals. Your advantage: specialized knowledge is valuable. Your challenge: you may need additional credentials.

**Five Questions About Your Degree**

What is my degree useful for? Not in theory — in practice. What jobs ask for a degree in [your major]?

What jobs DON'T require my specific degree but would value the skills I built? (Often this is the longer list.)

If I never use my degree in a traditional way, would I regret it? Or was the degree valuable for what I learned?

Are there credentials, certifications, or graduate programs that would unlock better opportunities in fields I'm interested in?

Am I trying to force my degree to fit a career it wasn't designed for — or is that actually where my passion is?

**How aligned is your degree with your current career interests? If misaligned, what are you considering instead?**


**Are there skills you developed in college that you want to use in your next role? What kinds of jobs would let you use them?**

03

- Job Search Strategy

If you're going straight into the job market, you need a strategy. A good one accounts for how long the process typically takes, where opportunities actually live, and how to stay organized when you're applying to dozens of positions.

### **Realistic Timeline**

Entry-level job searches typically take 2–6 months from active searching to offer. This varies by field and luck, but plan for persistence.

<b>Timeline</b>	<b>What to Focus On</b>
<b>Months 1–2 (June–July)</b>	Reflection and targeting. Identify 20–30 companies and roles you're genuinely interested in. Update your résumé and LinkedIn. Start networking conversations.
<b>Months 2–4 (July–September)</b>	Active applications. Apply to 5–15 positions per week. Customize cover letters. Follow up with internal connections.
<b>Months 4–6 (September–November)</b>	Interview process. First-round interviews, technical assessments, final rounds, negotiations. Some roles move fast (2 weeks); others take months.
<b>Beyond 6 months</b>	Reevaluate your strategy. Are you targeting the right roles? Is your résumé clear? Should you expand geographically or industry-wise?

## Where Jobs Actually Live

<b>LinkedIn</b>	<b>The dominant platform for entry-level hiring. Keep your profile complete. Enable 'Open to Work.' Many positions are posted here first.</b>
<b>Company Websites</b>	Big companies post on their own career pages. This is where many entry-level positions live. Set up job alerts on company websites you care about.
<b>Job Boards</b>	Indeed, Glassdoor, The Muse (startup jobs), specific industry boards. Useful for breadth, but LinkedIn and company sites are usually more current.
<b>Networking</b>	Many entry-level roles are filled by referrals before they hit job boards. Informational interviews, mentors, alumni networks matter enormously.
<b>Recruiters</b>	Some staffing agencies specialize in entry-level placement. They can move faster than traditional hiring.

## Application Tracking System

You'll apply to many positions. You need a system to stay organized, or you'll lose track of where you've applied, what you emphasized in each cover letter, and when to follow up.

Position	Company	Date Applied	Contact	Status	Follow-up Date

## Cover Letter Formula

Your cover letter is not a summary of your résumé. It's an argument for why you're interested in THIS job at THIS company.

<b>Opening (1–2 sentences)</b>	<b>Say the position title and why you're drawn to it. Show you've done research: reference a specific project, value, or initiative of the company.</b>
<b>Paragraph 1 (3–4 sentences)</b>	Connect one skill or experience to a core responsibility of the role. Be specific. Don't be generic.
<b>Paragraph 2 (3–4 sentences)</b>	Address another skill-to-job connection OR explain why this company specifically appeals to you (culture, mission, growth area).
<b>Closing (2 sentences)</b>	Reiterate your interest. Call to action: suggest next steps or express availability for a conversation.

	<p><b>NETWORKING MATTERS MORE THAN YOU THINK</b></p> <p>Studies consistently show that 50–70% of jobs are filled through personal connections, not job postings. This doesn't mean you need to know everyone. It means: tell people you're looking, ask for introductions, engage thoughtfully with companies you care about.</p>
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<p><b>What types of roles and companies are you targeting? List 20–30 specific companies you'd be excited to work for.</b></p>

<p><b>Who do you know who works at a company you're interested in? How can you have a genuine conversation with them about your career interests?</b></p>

**What accomplishment from college or work can you use as a concrete example in cover letters? What skill does it demonstrate?**


**04**

- Graduate School: Is It Right for You?

Graduate school is a legitimate path — and completely the wrong choice for others. The decision shouldn't be made in a panic or because you're not sure what else to do. It requires honesty about your goals, finances, and the actual ROI of a graduate degree in your field.

**When Graduate School Makes Sense**

<b>Your field requires it</b>	<b>Medicine, law, psychology (for clinical practice), engineering (for some specializations), academia. If practitioners in your field have graduate degrees, it's not optional.</b>
<b>You want advanced expertise</b>	You're interested in research, complex problem-solving, or specialized knowledge that an undergraduate degree doesn't provide.
<b>Your undergraduate record is strong</b>	Good GPA, relevant experience, and a clear narrative for why grad school is the right next step.
<b>You've worked in your field first</b>	You understand what the work entails and whether an advanced degree will meaningfully improve your prospects. This is underrated.
<b>You're pursuing a specific program</b>	You've researched programs, identified faculty whose work aligns with yours, and have a concrete research interest.

**When It's Probably Not the Right Move**

<b>You're undecided</b>	<b>Grad school is too expensive and time-consuming to use as a 'pause button.'</b> If you don't know what you want, work first. Get clarity. Come back to grad school after.
<b>You're applying to avoid the job market</b>	Job hunting is hard and anxiety-inducing. That's normal. Grad school is not easier — it's just different. And the job market waits for you at the end anyway.
<b>You're chasing prestige</b>	A prestigious master's degree doesn't guarantee career outcomes the way an undergraduate degree does. A good master's from a solid program beats a prestigious master's in the wrong field.
<b>Your undergraduate GPA is low</b>	Especially for master's programs at competitive schools, your GPA matters. If you're at a 2.7 or below, your options are limited. Work first, prove yourself professionally, come back.
<b>Your field doesn't require or value it</b>	In tech, business, and many creative fields, a master's degree is often a waste of time and money. Work, build a portfolio, develop expertise.

## Types of Graduate Programs

Program Type	Length	Thesis?	Cost	Best For
Master's (coursework)	1–2 years	No	Out-of-pocket	Career transition, specialization, professional advancement
Master's (thesis)	2–3 years	Yes	Often funded	Research interest, preparation for PhD
Doctoral (PhD)	5–7 years	Yes	Fully funded	Academic careers, research-intensive fields
Professional (MD, JD, MBA)	2–4 years	No	Very expensive	Medicine, law, business — career requirements
Certificate/Diploma	1 year or less	No	Variable	Credential for career change without full degree

## Research vs. Professional Master's

Research Master's	Professional Master's
Thesis-based	Coursework-based
2–3 years	1–2 years
Often fully funded	Usually not funded (you pay tuition)
Prepares you for PhD or research careers	Prepares you for industry careers
Work closely with an advisor	Learn tools and frameworks; apply them immediately

*If you decide to pursue graduate school, visit Bryan's comprehensive Graduate School Application Playbook at [hearn.consulting/curriculum.html](http://hearn.consulting/curriculum.html). It covers everything from GRE/GMAT prep to personal statements to navigating the application process itself.*

**Does your field require a graduate degree for the career you envision? Or would it be nice-to-have but not necessary?**


**What would grad school unlock for you that an undergraduate degree doesn't? Be specific about the skills, credentials, or opportunities.**


**If you took it off the table entirely, what would you do instead? If that sounds more appealing, it might be a sign to work first.**

05

- Financial Independence

You're likely entering the workforce at an entry-level salary. Your degree, credentials, and experience are valuable, but they don't immediately translate to a six-figure paycheck. The question now is: How do you live intentionally on the income you have?

Financial independence doesn't mean being rich. It means understanding your numbers, making choices aligned with your values, and building habits that serve you long-term.

### **First: Know Your Numbers**

Before you do anything else, gather your financial data. This isn't about judgment. It's about clarity.

<b>Take-home pay (after taxes)</b>	<b>This is what actually lands in your account monthly. Your gross salary minus taxes, benefits, etc.</b>
<b>Essential expenses</b>	Housing, food, transportation, insurance, minimum debt payments. These are non-negotiable.
<b>Discretionary spending</b>	Everything else: dining out, subscriptions, hobbies, gifts, entertainment.
<b>Student loans (total)</b>	How much do you owe? To whom? What are the interest rates? What are your repayment options?
<b>Other debt</b>	Credit cards, car loans, personal loans. Interest rates matter enormously.

## The Real Conversation: Student Loans

If you have student loans, you need a strategy. There's no one-size-fits-all answer, but you have options.

<b>Federal vs. Private Loans</b>	<b>Federal loans have income-driven repayment options and potential forgiveness programs. Private loans don't. Know what you have.</b>
<b>Standard Repayment</b>	Fixed payments over 10 years. Pays off faster, builds equity. Good if your income can sustain it.
<b>Income-Driven Repayment</b>	Your payment is 10–20% of discretionary income. Smaller payments initially, but you pay more interest over time.
<b>Deferment or Forbearance</b>	If you hit financial hardship, you can pause payments (you still owe interest on unsubsidized loans). Use only as emergency fallback.
<b>Extra Payments</b>	If you have the cash, paying more than your minimum goes straight to principal. This saves years of interest. But only after you have emergency savings.

## Building Your Financial Foundation

Once you have a job, set these up in this order:

Emergency fund: 1 month of essential expenses in a separate savings account. Before retirement savings. Before extra loan payments. This prevents you from using credit cards if disaster strikes.

Employer retirement plan (401k/403b): Contribute enough to get the full employer match (if available). This is free money. Don't skip it.

Health insurance: If your employer provides it, enroll immediately. Health crisis can derail your financial plan. If not, look into marketplace plans or your parent's plan (if allowed).

Disability insurance: If your employer offers it, get it. On an entry-level salary, an illness or injury that prevents work is catastrophic. This protects your income.

Extra student loan payments: Only after you have emergency savings. Paying extra is good, but financial security comes first.

## Budgeting That Actually Works

Most people hate budgets because they feel restrictive. The trick is making a budget that aligns with your values, not your anxiety.

<b>50/30/20 approach</b>	<b>Allocate 50% to needs (housing, food, transport), 30% to wants (entertainment, dining), 20% to savings and debt payment. Adjust based on your reality.</b>
<b>Zero-based budgeting</b>	Every dollar has a job. Write down income, allocate to categories until you hit zero. Requires more tracking but builds awareness.
<b>Envelope system</b>	Allocate money to categories, track spending. Old-school but works. Modern version: separate savings accounts for different goals.
<b>Automated + manual</b>	Automate your retirement and emergency fund (it happens without thinking). Manually track discretionary (it makes you conscious of choices).

### Insurance Essentials

Insurance is boring, but not having it is expensive. Three types matter early on:

<b>Health Insurance</b>	Required. If your employer provides it, understand your plan. If not, <a href="https://www.healthcare.gov">healthcare.gov</a> has marketplace options. Costs vary widely.
<b>Renter's or Homeowner's Insurance</b>	If you live in rental housing, renter's insurance is inexpensive and protects your stuff. If you buy a home, it's required by mortgage lenders.
<b>Auto Insurance</b>	Required by law if you own a car. Shop around; rates vary. Liability is essential; collision/comprehensive depends on your car's value.

	<p><b>THE CORE PRINCIPLE</b></p> <p>Money is a tool for the life you want to build. You're not supposed to be wealthy in your 20s. You're supposed to be intentional — understanding where your money goes, making choices aligned with your values, and avoiding decisions that compound into years of financial stress.</p>
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**What is your monthly take-home income? What are your fixed essential expenses (housing, food, transportation, debt payments)?**


**How much are you currently spending on discretionary items? Where is money going that doesn't align with your values?**


**Do you have student loans? What is the total amount, interest rates, and your current repayment plan?**


**What is your financial priority for the next year: building emergency savings, paying down debt, saving for a goal, or something else?**


06

- Building Your Professional Identity

Your professional identity is not your job title. It's the reputation you build, the expertise you develop, and the network you cultivate. In the first few years out of college, you're establishing how people perceive your work, your reliability, and your ambitions.

### **LinkedIn: More Than a Digital Résumé**

Your LinkedIn profile is where employers, clients, recruiters, and colleagues find you. It's not for bragging — it's for clarity.

<b>Profile photo</b>	<b>Professional, friendly, well-lit. No filters, no distracting backgrounds. This is how people connect a face to a name.</b>
<b>Headline</b>	Don't just put your job title. Use it to add context: 'Product Manager   Growth Stage SaaS   Metrics & User Research' is better than 'Product Manager.'
<b>About section</b>	Write in first person. What work excites you? What are you looking to learn or contribute? This is where personality matters.
<b>Experience section</b>	Add descriptions to each role. Don't just list duties. Describe impact: 'Led Q3 product launch, resulted in 15% increase in user engagement.'
<b>Recommendations &amp; Endorsements</b>	Early in your career, ask managers and colleagues for recommendations (specific ones matter more than generic praise).

### **Professional Development Strategy**

You can't stay stagnant in your field. Pick one or two areas where you want to develop expertise and pursue them intentionally.

Learn on the job: The best learning happens through work. Volunteer for projects that stretch you. Ask for feedback. Reflect on what worked and what didn't.

Certifications: Depending on your field, a credential (AWS certification, Google Analytics certification, project management certification) can differentiate you. Research what matters in your industry.

Reading and research: Stay current in your field. Follow industry trends, read books and articles, listen to relevant podcasts. This is low-cost and high-value.

Conferences and networking events: Go to at least one professional conference per year (even if you pay out of pocket). The people you meet matter as much as the sessions you attend.

Mentorship: Find someone 3–5 years ahead of you and ask if they'll grab coffee quarterly to discuss your career. Most people say yes. It's invaluable to learn from someone who's recently navigated what you're navigating.

### The Mentor Relationship

A good mentor is not a parent, therapist, or life coach. They're someone who's done something you want to do and can offer perspective on how to get there.

<b>Finding one</b>	<b>Look within your network first (former professors, colleagues, alumni from your school who work at companies you care about). Reach out directly: 'I admire your work on X. Would you be open to quarterly coffee?'</b>
<b>What to ask about</b>	Specific decisions they made (career transitions, specializations), how they navigated challenges, what they wish they'd known early on, what skills matter most in your field.
<b>How often</b>	Monthly or quarterly is typical for early-career mentoring. Schedule it; don't make it ad-hoc. Come prepared with 2–3 questions.
<b>The reciprocal part</b>	Even as a junior person, you have something to offer: energy, perspective on newer trends, and the feedback that comes from being outside someone's daily work.

### Building Your Reputation

Your reputation compounds over time. Early on, focus on three things:

<b>Reliability</b>	Do what you say you'll do. Respond to messages. Meet deadlines. Show up on time. This sounds basic, but it's rare enough to differentiate you.
<b>Quality of work</b>	Your work speaks for itself. It doesn't have to be perfect, but it should reflect care and attention. People notice who produces work they can count on.
<b>How you treat people</b>	How you talk about others (especially when they're not in the room), how you respond to mistakes, how you ask for help, how you share credit. These things get around.

**What is your professional headline on LinkedIn? Does it say something meaningful about what you do, or is it just a job title?**

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**What is one area of expertise you want to develop in the next 2–3 years? What's your plan to deepen that knowledge?**

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**Who is someone in your field you'd want as a mentor? How could you approach them authentically?**

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Your first job out of college is not forever. But it is formative. The habits you build, the feedback you learn to seek, and how you navigate workplace culture will shape how you approach every job afterward.

### **First Day to First Month**

The first 30 days matter for building initial impressions. Here's what helps:

Arrive early and stay late (just for the first month). You don't have to maintain this forever, but showing you're serious in the opening weeks sets a tone.

Take notes obsessively. Write down names, processes, who does what, and key company history. This makes you less likely to repeat questions.

Ask good questions. There's a difference between asking 'How do I do this task?' (shows you're trying) and 'What do you need from me in this role?' (shows you're thinking about contribution).

Say yes to tasks, even when they're not in your job description. Early on, flexibility and willingness to help matter more than protecting your turf.

Eat lunch with people. Relationships make work better. Use the first month to get to know colleagues.

### **Understanding Workplace Culture**

Every workplace has a culture — explicit values and unwritten rules. Understanding it early is invaluable.

<b>How people talk about work</b>	<b>Is it stressful or relaxed? Collaborative or competitive? Do people complain about leadership or defend it? Do they stay late or leave at 5?</b>
<b>How decisions get made</b>	Are they top-down or consensus-driven? Can you push back on a decision, or is it final when the boss says so? Who actually has influence?
<b>Work-life balance</b>	Do people take vacation or hoard it? Do they email at 10 p.m.? Is there flexibility for medical appointments or personal needs?
<b>Feedback style</b>	Do people give feedback directly or hint around it? Is there a formal review process or informal check-ins? Is criticism welcomed or avoided?
<b>Advancement expectations</b>	How do people move up? Is it based on tenure, performance, networking, or education? Are there clear paths or is it opaque?

## Managing Up

Managing up means shaping your relationship with your boss in ways that serve both of you. This is a learned skill, not manipulation.

<b>Know their priorities</b>	<b>What does your boss care most about? What keeps them up at night? Align your work to show how you're helping.</b>
<b>Communicate proactively</b>	Don't wait for performance reviews to share what you're working on. Weekly check-ins or Slack updates keep them in the loop.
<b>Ask before acting</b>	Especially early on, confirm your understanding before you execute. 'I'm planning to do X. Does that align with your priorities?'
<b>Anticipate problems</b>	Don't just bring problems to your boss. Bring problems with proposed solutions. 'I see we might miss this deadline. Here's what I'm thinking.'
<b>Give them wins</b>	Make your boss look good. When you do good work, the credit flows up. This isn't about stealing credit from yourself — it's about understanding that your boss's success depends partly on your work.

## Asking for Feedback

Most people don't get enough feedback because they don't ask for it. Feedback is how you improve.

<b>Schedule it formally</b>	<b>Don't ask in passing. 'Can I get 15 minutes next week to get feedback on my X project?' gives people time to think.</b>
<b>Ask specifically</b>	Not 'What do you think?' but 'On this presentation, what could I have done better on the delivery?'
<b>Listen without defending</b>	Your job is to understand their perspective, not convince them they're wrong. You can disagree later, but in the feedback conversation, listen.
<b>Follow up</b>	If you get feedback, implement it (or explain why you're not). Then come back: 'I took your suggestion about X. I saw a difference in Y.'

	<p><b>RED FLAGS IN A NEW JOB</b></p> <p>If your boss regularly yells, if there's no clarity on expectations, if people tell you to 'just do what I say without asking questions,' if feedback is only negative, if the workload is consistently untenable — these are signs that the environment is unhealthy. Staying in a bad job 'for the résumé' is usually not worth the psychological cost.</p>
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<b>What are you most excited about in your first job? What are you most anxious about?</b>

<b>Who is someone at your workplace you'd like to build a relationship with? What's one thing you could do this week to start that relationship?</b>

- When Things Don't Go as Planned

Not everything will go according to plan. You might get rejected from jobs, fired from your first role, or realize your career goals have shifted. These aren't failures — they're detours. How you respond to them matters more than whether they happen.

### **Handling Rejection**

Rejection stings. You applied to a job, made it through multiple rounds, and didn't get an offer. Or you interviewed somewhere you were excited about and heard 'no.' This is normal and survivable.

Process the emotion: It's okay to feel disappointed. Give yourself 24 hours to sit with it. Then move on.

Ask for feedback: Email the recruiter or hiring manager: 'I'm grateful for the opportunity. If you have any feedback on my candidacy, I'd appreciate it so I can improve for future opportunities.'

Sometimes they'll tell you what held you back. Sometimes they won't. Either way, you've positioned yourself professionally.

Look for patterns: If you're getting rejected at the same stage (first round, final round), it's a clue about what to improve. First rounds? Your resume or initial pitch needs work. Final rounds? You're interviewing well but something about your fit is off.

Keep applying: One rejection doesn't mean you should change your entire strategy. Keep applying to relevant roles. A 'no' from one company is just one data point, not a verdict on your candidacy.

### **Getting Fired or Leaving Suddenly**

It happens. You might be fired, or you might quit because the job is unsustainable. Either way, the conversation about what comes next matters.

Take time to process: A few days, not a few months. Use the time to think about what you actually want, not to spiral.

Be honest in interviews: You don't need to badmouth your previous employer, but you can be truthful. 'The role wasn't a good fit' or 'The company culture wasn't aligned with what I'm looking for' is honest without being bitter.

Don't hide it: Gaps in employment happen. Employers understand. What matters is that you can talk about what you learned from the experience.

### **Pivoting Your Career Direction**

You get to college thinking you'll be a lawyer. By graduation, you're not sure. Or you start a job and realize it's not what you thought. This is normal. Career changes early on don't require complicated explanations — they require honesty about what you learned.

Give your current role a real chance: Three months is minimum. One year is better. You need enough time to actually understand the work before you decide it's not for you.

Explore intentionally: If you're considering a pivot, spend time with people in the field you're considering. Do informational interviews. Volunteer or freelance in that space. Don't make a leap without understanding what you're leaping into.

Plan your pivot: If you're moving into a field that requires specific skills or credentials, identify what you need to learn. Take courses, build a portfolio, make the case to a potential employer that you're serious about the transition.

### **The Gap Year or Gap Years**

Maybe you want to travel. Maybe you need to work through some personal stuff. Maybe you haven't found what excites you yet. A gap year is legitimate, and you don't owe anyone an apology for taking one.

But be intentional: A gap year where you sit on your couch will feel like a loss of momentum. A gap year where you travel, volunteer, freelance, or work contract jobs can be invaluable. The key is that it's a choice, not a default.

#### **PROGRESS ISN'T LINEAR**

Your career will not be a straight line from graduation to your dream job. There will be detours, rejections, and pivots. That's not a sign you're failing — it's a sign that you're learning and growing. Every successful person you know has been rejected, has taken a job that didn't work out, or has changed directions at least once.

**What is your biggest fear about the transition after graduation? What's one small thing you could do this week to address that fear?**


**If your first job doesn't work out, what would you do next? Who could you reach out to for support or guidance?**


09

- Mental Health & Wellbeing

The transition after college is one of the biggest you'll go through in your life. Your entire social infrastructure shifts. The routines that structured your day disappear. Your identity as a student ends. This is a lot.

Taking care of your mental health during this transition is not a luxury — it's essential.

### **Post-College Adjustment**

What you might feel:

**Loneliness:** You go from being surrounded by thousands of people your age to sitting in your apartment or starting a job where everyone is older. Loneliness is real and common. It doesn't mean something is wrong with you.

**Impostor syndrome:** You got the degree, you got the job, but you don't feel like you belong. Everyone else seems to know what they're doing. They don't. Feeling like you don't belong is almost universal in first jobs.

Lack of purpose: In college, success was defined for you: get good grades, finish the degree, graduate. Now you get to define success. That freedom is also terrifying. Without external structure, some people flounder.

Anxiety about the future: You're supposed to have it figured out, but you don't. What if you make the wrong choice? What if you're doing this wrong? This is normal. Everyone feels this way.

### **Building Adult Friendships**

In college, friendships were built-in. You lived with people. You saw them daily in classes. After college, friendships require intentionality, and that's jarring.

Friendships take time: A real friendship doesn't develop in one coffee chat. It requires repeated interactions, vulnerability, and mutual investment. Plan to spend 6–12 months building friendships in a new city or job.

Join groups: You're not going to 'naturally' meet people like you did in college. You have to put yourself in spaces where you're likely to meet people: clubs, volunteer organizations, recreational sports leagues, religious communities, coworking spaces, book clubs. Pick something and commit to it for at least two months.

Be the one who reaches out: Most people are waiting for someone else to text first. Be the person who does. Invite someone to coffee. Suggest a group activity. This is vulnerable, but it's also how friendships start.

Stay connected to college friends: Long-distance friendships take more effort, but they're worth it. Schedule regular video calls. Visit when you can. The people you went to college with get this transition in a way others might not.

### **When You Need Professional Help**

Therapy, counseling, or talking to a doctor is not a sign of weakness or failure. It's a sign that you're taking care of yourself.

Consider talking to someone if:

You feel persistently sad, anxious, or hopeless (more than a few weeks)

You're struggling to get out of bed or take care of basic needs

You're having thoughts of harming yourself

You're turning to substances (alcohol, drugs) to cope

You feel like you can't handle the demands of work or relationships

You're isolating yourself or withdrawing from people

Options for support:

Your doctor: They can refer you to a therapist or psychiatrist. Some employers offer Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) that provide free or low-cost counseling.

Therapy: Look for therapists through Psychology Today's directory, your insurance, or apps like BetterHelp. The right fit matters — it's okay to try a few therapists before finding one that works.

Crisis lines: If you're in crisis, call the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline (call or text 988) or the Crisis Text Line (text HOME to 741741). These are free, confidential, and available 24/7.

<p><b>YOU DON'T HAVE TO HAVE IT ALL FIGURED OUT</b></p> <p>There's an implicit pressure after graduation to know exactly who you are and where you're going. You don't. Most adults don't. The people who seem to have it all figured out often don't — they're just better at pretending. Give yourself permission to be uncertain, confused, and still figuring it out. That's not a failure. That's growing up.</p>
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<p><b>How are you feeling about the transition after graduation? What emotions are coming up for you?</b></p>

<p><b>What's one thing you can do this week to take care of your mental health? (This could be as simple as calling a friend, going for a walk, or scheduling therapy.)</b></p>

- Your 90-Day Post-Graduation Plan

The first quarter after graduation is crucial. You don't need to have your entire life figured out in 90 days, but you do need a plan for how you'll spend them intentionally.

### **Month 1 (July): Rest and Reflect**

Objectives:

Take at least one week completely off. Sleep. Read books that have nothing to do with career. Spend time with people you love.

Journal about your college experience. What did you learn? What did you love? What are you ready to leave behind?

Identify 20–30 companies or roles you'd be excited about (or explore 5–10 graduate programs if grad school is on the table).

Update your résumé and LinkedIn profile. Have someone you trust review them.

Reach out to 3–5 people whose careers you admire. Ask them for a 15-minute coffee chat or phone call to talk about how they started.

### **Month 2 (August): Active Exploration**

Objectives:

Begin applying to jobs. Aim for 5–15 applications per week. Customize each cover letter.

Have 2–3 informational interviews or coffee chats per week. (That's coffee conversations with people in careers that interest you, not job interviews.)

Identify one skill you want to develop in your first job. Take a free or low-cost online course (Coursera, Udemy, LinkedIn Learning) to start building that skill.

If you haven't started working yet, take a part-time or contract job. Anything. Something to build momentum and have a structured day.

Build one friendship or strengthen one connection in your new city/job. Have two substantive conversations with a new person (not surface-level chat).

### **Month 3 (September): Momentum**

Objectives:

Depending on where you are: Continue active job search (interviews, follow-ups), or begin your first job (focus on first 30 days priorities).

Build your professional foundation. Get health insurance sorted, open a retirement account (if employed), start emergency savings.

Identify a potential mentor (someone 3–5 years ahead of you). Reach out and ask if they'd be open to quarterly coffee chats.

Spend one evening reflecting on what worked in the first three months and what didn't. Adjust your approach for the next quarter.

Check in on your mental health. Are you feeling good? Isolated? Anxious? Excited? Whatever you're feeling is valid, but check in with yourself intentionally.

- Your 90-Day Action Checklist
- Month 1
  - Take one week off (no job searching, no planning)
  - Journal about your college experience
  - Identify target companies/roles or graduate programs
  - Update résumé and LinkedIn
  - Schedule 3–5 informational interviews
- Month 2
  - Apply to 5–15 positions per week
  - Have 8–12 coffee chats (informational interviews)
  - Start one skill-building course
  - Start part-time or contract work (if not yet employed)
  - Build two new meaningful connections in your city/job
- Month 3
  - Complete job search or begin new job
  - Secure health insurance and retirement account
  - Identify and reach out to potential mentor
  - Reflect on first 90 days; adjust next quarter plan
  - Check in on mental health; seek support if needed

#### YOU'VE GOT THIS

Graduation marks an ending, but it also marks a beginning. You don't have to have everything figured out. You just have to take the next step. And then the next one. The people who seem to 'have it all figured out' are usually just making decisions, adjusting course, and moving forward. So can you.

#### What Comes Next Is Yours to Write

You've finished one chapter of your life. You've earned a degree. You've grown as a person. You've built relationships and learned things about yourself that will stay with you forever.

The next chapter is yours to write. It won't look like anyone else's. It will have surprises, detours, and moments where you're not sure if you're doing it right. That's normal. That's life after college.

You have everything you need to navigate this transition: curiosity, resilience, and the capacity to learn. Trust yourself. Reach out when you need support. And remember: every adult you admire has been exactly where you are now, feeling exactly what you're feeling, unsure of what comes next.

You're not supposed to have it all figured out. You're supposed to take the next step.

**Now what?**

**Go find out.**

**Bryan Hearn, Ed.D.**

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