

ALLISON E. MCWILLIAMS, PHD

**POST-
COLLEGE
STARTER
KIT**



**Making the Most of Your First
90 Days After College**

Post-College Starter Kit

**Making the Most Out of Your
First 90 Days After College**

By Allison E. McWilliams, PhD

Contents

Introduction...Page 4

The Work Part...Page 9

The Life Part...Page 15

The Next Part...Page 23

Introduction

Welcome to your Post-College Starter Kit and congratulations on your graduation to the real world! You did the work, completed the assignments, made the grades, did the internships and the part-time jobs, and had all the experiences that you're supposed to have in college to get you to this point. Only two million people graduate from college with a bachelor's degree in the U.S. each year, which puts you in a rare group, indeed. This is something to celebrate! You are, officially, a college graduate! Fully sixteen-plus years of hard work has gone into this moment (for your family, perhaps, many more), and that is no small accomplishment.

And.... now what? You've received that diploma and you've been hired at your first job or you're headed to graduate school. Perhaps you're still looking for what's next. You've moved to a new town or city, where maybe you know some people, or maybe you don't know a soul. And you've been told to go figure it out. To make the most of it. To jump in, feet first, and to learn how to swim. What in the world are you supposed to do with *that*?

Well, that's what this Starter Kit is for, and what we – the Alumni Personal & Career Development Center – are here for. The point of this guide isn't to tell you everything you need to know, or how to do everything, but to give you some tools and advice on how to make the most of this transition moment, so that you can land on your feet and feel a bit more confident about who you are and where you are headed. Because the truth is, change is hard, and this change that you're going through right now can be one of the hardest.

Why is that? While you have accomplished a whole lot, and you have learned a whole lot, and you may have worked really hard to get here, nothing in the past sixteen years, from a structural sense, has really prepared you for this moment. Unless you are off to graduate school (and on to be a professor, and even then, this applies), nothing about the rest of your life will be organized by semesters, lectures, syllabi, grading rubrics, and so forth. You won't get to re-set every few months and begin again. You may not be surrounded by helpful, supportive people who want to see you succeed.

Well, great, you're probably thinking, that sounds terrible. Why do I want to do this? Great question. We don't know, either. Just kidding. But there is a reason lots of people call college the best four years of your life, and there's a reason why no one says that about what comes after. And whether you feel that way about college, or not, being a fully-fledged grown-up (which you are, now) can sometimes feel like it's not all that it's cracked up to be. Being a grown-up is going to work, and paying your bills, and cleaning up after yourself, and putting money away for your future, and finding and building adult relationships, and doing it over and over again every day for the rest of your life.

BUT. Here's the good news (phew!): being an adult is also about making choices and decisions about who you want to be, and what you want to do, and living life on your terms. And you get to start to make those choices right now! Because you are, officially, part of the adult community. That's what you've really graduated into: a community of people going through the same things you are. Another word for graduation is commencement, which is, I think, a better way to look at it. You aren't just graduating from college, you are commencing the rest of your life. It is, and should be, a pretty amazing journey. You just need some tools and resources to help you get started. And that's why

we're here, and why we will continue to be here along the way. Because no one should have to do this work on their own.

Why a Starter Kit?

So why, then, a Starter Kit? Why not a "Give Me Everything I Need to Be Successful Forever," kit? Well, first, there's no such thing. Life is all about gaining wisdom, knowledge, and insight through experience into who you are and where you are headed, and no amount of to-do lists, or tools and strategies given to you by others is going to take the place of that. At some point you do have to jump in, feet first, and learn how to swim. But that doesn't mean you can't make it a bit easier. Because this transition that you're in right now is hard, and no one talks about it nearly enough.

You received a lot of help when you made the transition *into* college, from orientation to dedicated advising to a campus full of resources including counseling, career development, identity-related spaces, tutoring, and many, many more. You may have had endless amounts of people giving you advice on how to navigate the system effectively, and you were surrounded by thousands of your peers in a ready-made community. On top of which, you were entering into an experience (school) that was not so dissimilar from the experience you just left (school). Does all of that mean it was easy for you? Not necessarily, of course. But at least there was some familiarity about it.

This transition, from college to work and life after college, is one of the biggest ones you will ever make in your life. And you probably haven't gotten a lot of help with it, at least not explicitly so, in terms of how to navigate through it; how to show up and be successful, both in work and in your life; and how to weed through all of the information and advice in order to make the right decisions for your future. In fact, when we started the Alumni Personal & Career Development Center at Wake Forest, we did so with a primary goal of helping our students and young alumni as they are making this specific transition, which we have identified through our research as the greatest pain point young adults face. So take heart! You're not alone.

And, that's why we have created this Starter Kit, to normalize this experience a bit, and to get you started with as much confidence and sound advice as possible. Think of this as your orientation to your life *after* college. Just like new-student orientation, this will be a snapshot of what you need to know, so that a few months from now you will feel more confident in your new role as a young adult. Along the way, you will add in tools and knowledge that you gain from your own experiences, creating a path forward that is uniquely yours.

Change is Hard, Proceed with Intention

Before we get started, let's take a moment to talk about change. Because change is hard, for everyone, but we each move through it in different ways. The organizational consultant William Bridges has described the change process as involving three critical

stages.¹ *Endings* require you to let go of what has become familiar and comfortable. *The neutral zone*, in between endings and beginnings, can be both freeing but also a little scary, as you are no longer tied down to the past reality that you knew, and have yet to attach yourself to a new one. Finally, you reach *a new beginning* and must adapt to a new place with new norms and rules for behavior. Your progress through these stages is deeply personal; while someone else may race through to get to a new beginning, you may hang out for a bit in the neutral zone, resisting the urge to adapt and conform to new rules, while someone else is clinging for dear life to that ending, not wanting to let go.

Take a moment here to think for yourself: which stage would you say that you are in, right now? Are you trying to cling to that past life (college) that was so safe and familiar, where you knew what you needed to do to be successful? Have you grabbed on to this new beginning, excited and perhaps a bit apprehensive about what comes next, but ready to face it? Or are you trying to hang out in some in-between space, not quite wanting to let go and not ready to fully embrace what's next?

There is no right or wrong answer here, though circumstances eventually will force you to let go of the past and walk into what's next. Your choice, and it's always a choice, is whether you do so with intention or whether you do so with your eyes closed, your arms crossed, being pushed from behind.

It's important to recognize and acknowledge what your emotions are around this point of transition. The psychologists Don Kelley and Darryl Connor created what they called the Emotional Cycle of Change, which describes the journey that each individual completes during any sort of change process.² One moves from a state of uninformed optimism (I don't know what I don't know, but I bet it's going to be great!); to informed pessimism (Wait, this is what it means to be an adult? This sucks! No one told me this!); to informed optimism (Alright, this isn't completely terrible, I've found some friends, and I know a bit more about what I'm doing at work.); to acceptance (I'm an adult, and that means taking responsibility for my choices.).

Note that acceptance doesn't mean being Pollyanna about it. Adulthood isn't all sunshine and roses (you do still have to pay those bills and take out the trash, among other things). But neither was college, nor adolescence, nor any other stage of your life. We look back on these former stages with fondness, often willfully forgetting what was hard or challenging, because it's easier to remember the good times. But you should remind yourself, here: you had to figure out how to be successful as a college student, and that wasn't easy; you had to figure out how to make friends and find your place in college, and that wasn't easy; you had to seek out opportunities and find mentors and learn and grow while you were a college student, and that wasn't easy. But you did those things. You can do them again.

As you move through this transition, resist the temptation to do it too quickly. Whatever stage you are in – ending, neutral zone, new beginning – that is exactly where you are supposed to be. Resist the temptation to capitulate to the “should's”: everyone else

¹ <https://wmbridges.com/about/what-is-transition/>

² Kelley, D. & Conner, D. (1979). The Emotional Cycle of Change. Annual Handbook for Group Facilitators.

seems to have it figured out, so should I. First of all, everyone else *doesn't* have it all figured out. And, who cares if they do? Your life is about you, not about anyone else.

And, recognize that at some point – today, tomorrow, next week, next month – you are going to have to get on board with that new beginning, whatever it looks like for you. As much as we really liked having you at Wake Forest, you just can't stay here forever. And, you know those people that everyone refers to as a “permanent college student” or having “peaked in college?” That's not a compliment. That's a euphemism for someone who isn't willing to do the work that they need to do to grow up and be a fully formed and functioning adult. So, now is the time for you to do the work. To walk through this transition with intention, to make the most of what is happening to you, right now, to have the absolute best young professional experience you possibly can have. And, let's be clear, that doesn't mean not having any fun. This is your life! It better be fun, at the very least.

Start with these questions:

- What do I still need to let go of that is preventing me from moving forward?
- What will I need to accept to move forward?
- How am I feeling about this moment of transition?

Making the Most of Your First 90 Days

The point of this Starter Kit is to give you some tools and resources to make it through your first ninety days with confidence, with intention, and with a bit of grace. And that last one is no small thing. Give yourself a bit of grace that you *will* struggle, that you *won't* have it all figured out, not at the end of ninety days, possibly not ever. Because life is about the journey, not the destination. You are in a constant state of becoming: becoming who you are, becoming who you want to be, becoming who you will be. And that work never ends! (When it does, well, this ride is over.) It's an ongoing process of having some experience, learning something from it, and applying that knowledge to what comes next. And some of your best learning moments will come in the places where you screw things up. Embrace it, but don't forget to learn from it.

You won't have it all figured out in the first ninety days; far from it. Just like your orientation to college was important, these first three months after college are important as well, and deserve a bit of an orientation, too. These first three months set the tone for what comes next and give you valuable insight into work and life and how you can be successful there. In these first three months you will learn volumes about what it means to show up every day to work; tools and habits of productivity and relationship-building; and what you do and don't like about work environments, management, and let's be honest, other adults. You will feel a tiredness like you've never felt before and wonder how it's possible. Your relationship with time is going to change. Your relationships with your friends and family will change. You're going to be bombarded with tons of ideas, and questions, and thoughts that you might just feel unprepared to answer.

So consider this Starter Kit a bit of an orientation to what's about to happen. In the next few pages, you will find some tips and tools on doing the work part, doing the life part,

and doing the next part, which is what we call your *Five For Your First Five*. Just like with your college orientation, you will find a lot of general information here, which you will then have to adjust and apply to your specific situation as needed. Some of you will be in large corporate environments, some in small start-ups, some in non-profits. Each industry, and each organization will have a particular culture, norms, and expectations for behavior and success. You may be headed to graduate school or you may still be looking for a job. You may have moved to a city with tons of fellow Wake Forest graduates, or to one where you know no one. Your situation is individual to you. Think of these resources as your training wheels, to give you the confidence that you need eventually to take off on two wheels on your own.

And, as with all things, you have a choice. You can choose how you walk into, and through, the next three months, not to mention the next five years and the rest of your life. We hope you will do so with intention. No matter where you are in the change process – ending, neutral zone, new beginning – and no matter how you are feeling about where you are, don't miss the opportunity to set some intentions for yourself, to fully take advantage of this time in your life. After all, you will never be here, again. What a shame to look back and think, I would have, or I could have, done that differently had I only paused to think about it.

Take a moment to jot down the answers to the following:

- What do I hope to know about myself, three months from now, that I don't know, now?
- When I look back, three months from now, what will I be able to say about how I approached my work?
- When I look back, three months from now, what will I be able to say about how I approached finding friends and building community?

The Work Part

Why Do We Work?

Why do we work? This probably, on the face of it, seems like a silly question. We work because we have to, we work to make money, we work because that's just what we do, after college. But the bigger question here, the one that you need to start reflecting on, is why do *you* work? We each have different motivations for why we show up to work every day, and why we show up to *this* job and not another one. Why do these motivations matter? Well, it's pretty easy to get excited about work during the first few weeks. It's something new, you're learning a ton, you may feel, for the first time, like an actual adult. And then, well, work can become *work*. As you settle into a routine and become familiar with the day-to-day aspects of what you are supposed to be doing, you may discover that it's not all that exciting, and that you aren't actually putting your degree and your intellect to use in the ways that you anticipated.

Work is, actually, pretty hard. And by that, I don't mean beyond your capabilities. But there is a reason that it's not called "spa," or "fun." We came up with another term altogether to describe the exchange of effort and compensation that happens through work. Whether you are tending a farm, building a spreadsheet, managing a project, or leading a team, there is a desired and expected amount of energy and effort in, in exchange for an expected amount of compensation out. At its most basic level, this is what work is: the process by which earn money to pay for our lives.

And to a certain degree each of us wants for our work and our efforts to mean more than that. Because work is also very much tied up with who we are. It's how we define ourselves: I'm a teacher; I'm a lawyer; I'm a consultant. It's how we place value on our lives. Should work become your identify and the defining factor of your life? That's an individual, important question. It's why it's so important for you to identify why it is that you work and why you have chosen to work where you are. Because that *why* is what will keep you motivated well after the newness wears off.

A number of years ago a group of researchers, led by Amy Wrzesniewski of Yale's School of Management, identified the three primary orientations, or motivations to work.³ Those with a *job orientation* see work as a means to an end, allowing them to pursue other interests in their personal lives. Those with a *career orientation* are motivated by achievement related to upward mobility. And those with a *calling orientation* align their work with their personal identity, which is how they find meaning.

In this country, we tend to privilege those who are pursuing a career or following a calling. But many of us are just working a job, and there is nothing wrong with that. Maybe you have a great passion outside of your daily work, and you enjoy having a job that provides a lifestyle that allows you to pursue that. Or, maybe you really need to pay down some student loans, and so you sought out an opportunity that would put you in the best position to do that.

³ Wrzesniewski, A., McCauley, C., Rozin, P., & Schwartz B. Jobs, careers, and callings: People's relations to their work. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 31(1), 1997. <https://doi.org/10.1006/jrpe.1997.2162>.

The point is this: there is no right orientation or motivation to work. What's most important is identifying what *your* motivation is and beginning the process of reflecting on it. These orientations can and will change over time, as you gain experience, as you become clearer on who you are and what you value, and as you move in and out of different seasons of life (for example, when you have kids, or when you take on different work responsibilities). It's all OK, as long as you are being true to who you are and what's important to you.

It's also important to note that this place where you are right now probably isn't the dream job. This is just the first job and the first of many. Life is a journey of becoming, of getting closer and closer to that thing you might eventually call "the dream," through a series of experiences that help you to distinguish between those things that you like, and those things that you don't. It's all data to help you make more informed decisions about how you want to spend your time and your life. When you first enter the workforce, you simply do not have enough data yet.

And if that's true, where do you start?

- **Do what you're good at.** What are your strengths? What are those things that seem to come naturally to you, or that you can do with little effort? Look for roles that allow you to do those things as much as possible, with opportunities to grow into areas that aren't as strong or as familiar to you.
- **Do what you're interested in, right now.** It's completely OK to take a role that aligns with your current interests, even if you can't forecast how that will play out over a career. Remember, *it's all data*. Your next experience will help inform the one after that, and so on. Stop trying to figure out the next twenty years. Simply figure out what's next.
- **Do what you like.** Chances are, if you are doing something that aligns with your strengths and interests, you will be doing something that you like. Whether it's the industry, the mission of the organization, or the environment that you get to work in, find something that you like, and find a way to do more of that.

Culture and Fit

The term "fit," when it comes to work, has become particularly charged in recent years, as it often can be used as a reason to interject real bias into employment decisions (i.e., "He/She/They are too black/female/gay/etc. for our organization" becomes "He/She/They just aren't a good fit for our organization). Anyone on the hiring side of the equation must be careful when using this sort of language, and anyone who is seeking employment should pay attention to its use.

But for you, as a new employee, the role of culture and fit is an important one, no matter your race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or other factors. As you just read, part of the experience of being a working professional is collecting data – on what you do and don't like about work; what you do and don't like about your organization; what you do and don't like about the ways in which you and others are managed; as well as on your strengths, interests, and growth opportunities – and this is particularly true in your first few

months. This is a great time to pay attention, to listen and learn, to reflect deeply on these items, and to think about how good of a “fit” the organization is for you.

Organizations are made up of people, and that means that organizations have cultures and values which are shaped by those people. Most likely, wherever you are there is a set of values, probably found on a website, and your leadership may even make a decent effort to integrate those into systems and processes. And there is always another layer, which are the actual lived values of a place. How do people interact? How is the space used? What happens when someone is successful? What happens when someone fails? How is feedback delivered? These are all great questions to ask yourself, and to ask others, as you start to gather data on the place where you work.

Some other questions you should start to ask yourself about this place include:

- Do I feel like I belong here?
- Do I have what I need to be successful in my role?
- Do I know what is expected of me?
- Do I feel safe here?
- Am I happy here?
- Can I identify three or four goals that I should achieve in the next six months?
- Do I feel like my manager and co-workers support me and care about my growth?

If you can, discuss your answers with your manager and ask for their input and feedback. This is a great way to start building that relationship and to demonstrate your interest in your own growth and future.

Making the Most of Your First 90 Days – At Work

The first three months of any job, whether you’re fresh out of college or an experienced professional, can feel a bit like drinking from a firehose. The good news-bad news is, this won’t be the last time that you’re in this place, because this won’t be the last time you’re new in a job. Even if you stay with the same organization for the next forty years, which is increasingly unlikely, or even if you are in a profession that seems like it will never change, at some point you will take on a new role within that organization, take over a new project, add on administrative responsibilities, or in some other way feel like the new kid again. And, the good news-good news is, you *will* get better at it.

Don’t forget to give yourself some grace. Imagine for a moment that someone just told you that you had been hired as a professional athlete in a sport you don’t play, or as an artist or a musician when you’ve never performed in those ways before. Would you expect to be an expert, right out of the gate? Or would you expect there to be a learning curve, and seek out guidance and tools and resources to help you learn and get better?

Starting work in any other field isn’t all that different. Sure, it may not take the innate talent of the artist or the skills of a professional athlete, but there will be a learning curve. There’s no reason why you should expect to be a competent, skilled, experienced

professional on day one. No one is! Your colleagues know more than you because they've been there longer than you, and they've had time to learn the rules and norms of behavior, expectations for success, and what to do when they screw things up. You need to give yourself the time and the opportunity to do the same. And, recognize that these first few months are some of the *best* time to do this work, because everything is new and fresh and you're not carrying around any baggage of preconceived ideas or expectations. There is great value in being the new kid, the one who can ask the questions that everyone else is probably wondering, too, but has become too comfortable or too jaded to ask.

So, with that in mind, here are some tips on making the most of your first three months at work.

1. **Spend time building relationships.** The currency of almost any organization is in the people and the relationships. If you accomplish nothing else in your first three months, make sure to spend time getting to know the people with whom you work. Set up coffee meetings, formal or informal chats, or other times to get to know as many people as possible. What are their stories? What did they do before this role? How do they spend their time at work and outside of work? What gets them excited about work and what makes them the most frustrated? How can you support them in accomplishing their goals? What advice do they have for you? When you are a new professional, it can be hard to see any commonality with your older co-workers, but don't let that stop you from getting to know them. You will soon learn that relationships are key to your success at work.
2. **Get clear on goals and expectations.** By the end of your first three months, you should have a good amount of clarity about what is expected of you at work. This includes expectations for engagement – how and when you show up every day, how you should communicate with people internal and external to the organization, how you should ask for time off, and other perhaps unspoken rules of behavior – and also expectations for the type of work you should be producing. What does a “successful” employee look like and act like? What are the goals of your organization? What are your goals and how will they be measured? Don't make assumptions about these items. Ask your manager these questions and ask for feedback from your manager and others on the work that you are doing.
3. **Develop habits and routines.** Being a regular, 8-5, working professional is a routine unlike anything you have ever done before. Work-life doesn't happen in one and two-hour bursts of activity. It often occurs in nine and ten-hour blocks, five to six days a week. Not only will this schedule impact the rest of your life (when you will go to the grocery, do your laundry, exercise, sleep and so on), it also impacts how you get work done. The first three months of work is a great time to try out and start to adopt some habits and routines for productivity. This includes both when you show up (on time or early), when you leave (on time or late), how you set and manage priorities, and how you use tools such as calendars and email systems to organize

your work. What worked for you in college may not work as well at work. Pay attention to how you are spending and using your time.

4. **Figure out who the “important” and “smart” people are.** As you are building those relationships with your colleagues, pay attention to those others value as important or powerful. Typically, this isn’t the loudest person in the room or the person with the biggest title. Instead, the important people are the ones that have access and credibility, the people others listen to. These are the people with whom you want to align yourself. Similarly, you need to figure out who knows what they are talking about, who has done their homework, and who knows how to get things done. The first three months are a great time to watch, to listen, and to learn. As you are building relationships, ask people who *they* think the most important people are. Pay attention to what you hear.
5. **Learn all that you can.** One way that you make yourself credible and smart is by learning all that you can about your organization, your industry, and your role. Read up on the issues and trends affecting your work. Figure out who the key players are, who are the ones doing something innovative or entrepreneurial. If you are working somewhere that uses lots of acronyms or jargon, learn them. If you need to know how to use a specific piece of technology to do your work, learn how to use it. Get familiar with the organizational structure and the rules of behavior, both written and unwritten. You won’t be the most experienced or talented person there, but there’s no excuse for not doing your homework.

Tools and Resources

Speaking of homework, throughout your professional career, you will become familiar with industry, organization, and role-focused tools and resources which will be helpful to your career progression. These may include in-house trainings and mentoring programs, online courses and certifications, or even graduate school. You should get to know the particular trade and industry organizations and professional associations which support the work that you do; many of these will have a young professional track (and possibly even a discounted membership fee) which you should explore joining. And, at the very least, you should become familiar with the publications that are specific to your field.

All of that is work that you can start to do, right now. As well, here are some Wake Forest resources which have been created just for you.

- **Alumni Personal & Career Development Center (alumni.opcd.wfu.edu).** Here you will find stories about Wake Forest alumni and their career paths; career development advice pieces on everything from updating your resume to seeking out mentors to effective management practices; access to career coaching; job boards; information on getting connected to the Wake Forest network; and more.

- **@LifeAfterWake on Instagram.** This is where you will find our most up-to-date information on resources, tools, news, and events to support your professional development and career path.
- **Beyond the Forest e-newsletter (alumni.opcd.wfu.edu/e-newsletter/).** Sign up for our e-newsletter and every other month we will put targeted advice, resources, and upcoming events right in your inbox.
- **Wake Forest Alumni LinkedIn Group.** This is where you will find job postings for Wake Forest alumni, tools and resources, and information on events, as well as get connected to thousands of fellow alumni for advice and networking.

What if I'm Still Searching or Going to Graduate School?

Finally, a note for those of you who may still be searching for that first professional role, or perhaps headed to graduate school and feel like all of this work stuff doesn't apply to you, yet. First, for those of you still searching, please know that it is perfectly normal. While Wake Forest has great first destination outcomes for its graduates, it is worth remembering that those numbers reflect the first six months post-graduation. Although it would be nice to be able to say that all of our graduates are employed on the day of graduation, that's simply not realistic. Not every employer recruits for new positions at the same time each year. If, for example, you're interested in museums, education, social service organizations, or even some smaller corporate organizations, you're likely going to be looking at "just in time hiring." What does that mean? These organizations fill a need only when it comes available, and that doesn't necessarily happen in May each year.

And, you may still be figuring out what you want to do, next. Maybe you were so occupied with school that you've only now started to think about next steps. Maybe you were traveling. Maybe you're still trying to narrow down what it is you want to do. All of this is OK. And, you still have the support of the Wake Forest Office of Personal & Career Development, and as you now know, the Alumni Personal & Career Development Center, to figure out those next steps. Call us at 336.758.5902 or email us (careers@wfu.edu) and let's set up an appointment to make a plan and find the next step, for you.

Some of you aren't "employed" because you've decided to go to graduate school. This is a fine choice. But just because you're still going to be in school doesn't mean that none of this applies to you. In fact, being a graduate student is really nothing like being an undergraduate. You need to approach graduate school like it's your job, because that's what it is. Think about how you will build relationships, get clear on goals and expectations, develop habits and routines to help you to be successful, figure out who the important and the smart people are, and learn as much as you can. It all still matters!

The Life Part

Change is Hard

Life after Wake Forest isn't just about doing the work. It's also about doing life, and figuring out what that means, for you. You may have moved to a new city, and find yourself navigating new relationships both personally and professionally while figuring out where the old ones fit in. You may find it challenging to fit in all the things you want to do with the limited time you have available. You may struggle to identify the type of person you want to become, and how to create an intentional life that supports those choices. You may have to renegotiate boundaries with family members. At a very basic level, you may have to find a grocery, a gym, a new favorite coffee shop.

All of these experiences are normal. And, they don't happen overnight. Remember the change process you read about earlier. You're going to have to let go of some things, and be willing to grab hold of something new, to fully move through that process.

You should expect the first three months of any life transition to be incredibly hard, because you will be totally off your game. You're in a new place, you don't know anyone, and you're off your rhythms and don't have your go-to patterns. Part of the value of these first three months is finding those habits and routines that will help you to feel like you actually *live* in a place, and not like you're just playing tourist.

And there is great value in *being* a tourist, for a bit. You know what happens when you get settled and comfortable in a place? You stop wandering down side streets, just to see where they might lead. You no longer go on long, exploratory walks, just because. You don't go sit alone in a bookstore or a coffee shop or a restaurant, because you no longer have to. It's great to reach a point of comfort and familiarity. And, the greatest learning always happens just outside your comfort zone.

So embrace these first few months. Pay attention to what's happening and reflect on what you're learning along the way. Take some notes on your initial impressions – about people and places and what you're feeling – and then tuck it away somewhere to reread six months or a year from now. I bet you'll be shocked to see how far you've come, and to realize the clarity with which you saw things here at the beginning.

And here's the thing about this three month transition time. If you walk into it expecting it to be hard and uncomfortable and maybe even kind of lonely for three months, it won't surprise you when it is, and you will be far better-equipped to deal with it. And, you'll be so pleasantly surprised when it doesn't take you that long to find your places and some people, and to start to feel a bit more comfortable. A bit more like you're at home.

This Isn't College, Do This Differently

Some of you are walking confidently into this next phase, ready for a new version of you, a professional, competent, adult version of you, who lives independently, makes their own choices, builds a career, creates and maintains adult relationships, and begins to build a life for yourself. Good for you! And, some of you are wondering, what does any of

that mean, and how do I even get started? Am I an adult, now? Because it definitely doesn't feel like it.

There is no one moment, in fact, where you realize that you're an actual adult. No one hands you a certificate of adulthood, or throws you an adulthood party, or welcomes you into the community of adults. There are lots of little markers, of course: you turn 18 (you can vote!), you turn 21 (you can legally drink!), you turn 25 (you can rent a car!), you graduate from college, you get your first job, you pay taxes for the first time, you buy your first home, you get married, you have children, and so on and so on. And at none of these points, as monumental as they are (well, other than that car rental thing, which is just weird), will you say to yourself, *now I am an adult*. In fact, you're probably going to feel more like saying to yourself, *I have no idea what I'm doing, who let me in here?*

We all have a bit of the impostor syndrome when it comes to adulthood. We're all, in different ways, just faking it until we make it, whenever that is. That's what is a little bit terrifying about this transition: there are no clear rules, there are no instruction manuals. And it's what is very cool about it: everything is a giant learning opportunity, if you only approach it as such. What is clear is that this isn't college, and you can, and you should, do this differently. Even if you're not one of the ones walking into this next phase with confidence, you absolutely can and should be someone who does so with intention. What will the adult version of you look like? What do you want to value and hold dear, and what are you ready to let go of? These are choices that you get to make for yourself, now. Why not take some time to really think about it, and set some intentions for yourself?

Part of becoming an adult and taking ownership for your life means managing the details effectively: finances, time and priorities, and health and wellbeing. First, your finances. Only you know the state of your disposable income, but for most of you graduating college also means largely covering your expenses on your own from here on. And, if you've moved someplace like DC, New York, Boston, or San Francisco, this won't be an easy task. These are cities with high costs of living, which means that rent is elevated and so are basic expenses like food and social outings (to put it bluntly, you're going to pay more for a beer in New York than you will in Winston-Salem). And, unless you've gone into particular fields, like investment banking, often the salaries in these locations are not much higher than other places. Working in marketing in DC only pays a fraction more than working in marketing in Winston-Salem or Raleigh.

These are the realities of living in these locations. And that means you need to factor in these expenses with the amount of money you are making. You need to make a budget. You need to get honest with yourself about how much money you have coming in, and how much you have going out. This is a simple process: make a spreadsheet with categories across the top for the areas where you spend money. This would include things like rent, utilities, groceries, eating out, gym membership, coffee, and so on. The more categories you have, the better, as it will force you to get very clear on where your money is going. And then, for the next month or two, write down every single expense that you make. Don't cheat yourself! Be completely honest. And then see where you are spending money, where you might be able to cut back, and create a budget based on those choices. And stick to it.

There are online tools to help with this, of course. While these tools do simplify the process, to the point that you don't have to think about it, I do think there is value in doing some of that old-fashioned pen and paper (or finger to keyboard on an excel spreadsheet) work, to really see and understand where your money is going, and why. You can't change your habits if you don't understand the why behind them.

As part of your budgeting process, don't forget to research what is going to happen with your student loans, if you have them. Once you graduate or leave school, your federal student loan goes into repayment, and you will be placed into an automatic repayment plan. However, there may be up to a six or nine-month grace period, and you can potentially request a different payment plan if you need it. Also note that there is a lot happening with federal student loans, loan forgiveness, and repayment, which seems to change almost weekly. Don't make assumptions or wait to figure out what you will owe, and by when. Go here for additional information on federal loans:

<https://studentaid.gov/manage-loans/repayment> and reach out to your service provider for other loans. And, very importantly, *pay attention to your email*. Most loan servicers send an email when your billing statement is ready for you to access online. Missing payments or having a collection agency come after you will have serious long-term ramifications.

Just like with your money, you only have so much time in any given day or week. None of us has more than twenty-four hours in a day. This means that you have to get very clear with how you want to spend your available time. And just like with your spending, you can easily make a time budget and start to track how you are spending your time. At least nine hours will be spent at work (including lunch). Probably another hour (or more, depending on where you live) will be spent getting to and from work. You may spend one or two hours in the morning getting ready for work, eating breakfast, and so on. You may spend an hour exercising. An hour making and eating dinner. That leaves you with ten or eleven hours to do whatever else you want to do with the day.

Ten hours, you might be thinking, *that sounds like a lot!* Does it? How much sleep do you need each night? Eight hours? Well now you're down to two hours of available free time. Spend an hour on the phone or the internet and you've got one hour of available time to spend however you want. Except, don't forget about doing laundry, shopping for groceries, cleaning the apartment, paying bills, and so on.

So, that's depressing. And, it means you need to get super-clear on what your priorities are, and how you plan to manage your time during the week. Clearly, you won't work *every day*, which gives you some more time on the weekends. But even with that time I hope it's quite clear to you, now, that you can't do *everything*. Being an adult means making hard choices, and recognizing that sometimes you have to compromise one priority for the sake of another.

I want to caution you about aiming to fill every bit of free time that you have with something "productive." There is value in rest. There is value in mindless TV. There is value in time spent with friends, "doing nothing." One of the biggest mistakes that young people make when they first get out of college is trying to fill every hour with *something*, because they just don't know what to do with downtime, and they don't want to face the quiet spaces of being alone. Try to resist this urge. For one, you will find, over time, that the things you do will multiply, and soon you will be over-committed, just as you were in

college. As an adult, no one is impressed by, likes, or gives a pass to the person who says they are going to show up and then flakes out.

But slowly, and with intention, start to think about the things that give you energy and that align with your values. Were you involved with a church when you were in college, and is that something you value? Seek out a faith community in your new city. Do you gain energy from giving back and volunteering? Look for one (just one!) group where you might contribute your time. Do you find value in organized sports or working out or running? Seek that out and make it a part of your life. Being an adult means that you get to choose how you spend your time, and with whom. Just because you've moved somewhere new and don't know anyone yet, it doesn't mean you can't enjoy the activities that fill you up. As a bonus, these are opportunities to build community, too.

Now is a good time to ask yourself:

- What steps do I need to take to own my finances, starting now?
- What does my time budget tell me about where I am spending too much time, and where I am not spending enough?
- What is one non-work activity that I want to seek out, in the next month?

Why am I So Tired?

One of the first realizations that most new professionals have about work is that it comes with a special kind of tiredness that is both unexpected and hard to describe. Especially if all you are doing is sitting at a desk all day, it seems alarming to be as exhausted as you will be. Again, this is normal! Remember, up until this point your life operated in small bursts of energy of no more than a few hours at a time. Now you might be asked to focus on one task, or to stay in one spot, for days on end. At some point, it's worth thinking about your work environment and whether the one you're in is the one you would like to be in long-term. But that's a conversation for down the road. For now, you need to adopt some habits and build up some stamina in order to be a competent, effective, working professional.

What does this mean? For one, you *must* prioritize sleep and taking care of yourself, starting now. The things you could get away with in college – pulling all-nighters, burning the candle at both ends – simply won't carry you very far as an adult. Showing up to work bleary-eyed and sleep-deprived *will* get you noticed, but not for the reasons that you want. Give yourself a few weeks of going to bed earlier than you think you should, to start to build a habit and to get your body on the schedule it needs to be on to get through the day.

Taking care of yourself also means building in time to balance out your work life with non-work activities. If you're stuck in an office all day, take fifteen minutes at lunch to get outside and go for a walk. Figure out when your energy is the highest – before work or after – and use that time to get some regular physical exercise. Read books for pleasure and spend some mindless time in front of the TV. Eat healthy meals that you don't grab from a vending machine, a street cart, or a fast food joint. All these intentional choices are signs

that you are growing up and being an adult. And, they will do wonders for helping you to get over the feeling of being exhausted all the time.

Eventually you will adjust and you won't remember this feeling of tiredness, or it will shift into a different stage. Just remember: no one gets a prize for being the most run-down, the most burned-out, or the most incapable of coping with the demands of life. Everyone else you work with has already gone through this, created their routines, and learned how to show up every day energized and ready to work. They will expect you to do so, as well. And if you're not sure how, ask! There's always value in learning from the wisdom and experience of others.

This also means seeking out professional help if you need it. Whether or not you made use of the Counseling Center when you were at Wake Forest, there is no shame in seeking out professional counseling as an adult. Check with your health insurance to see whether they cover it and what you need to do, first, to make that happen. Unfortunately, this is one of those support areas that is no longer free to you as an adult. But that does not mean you should ignore it! Taking care of your mental self is as important as taking care of your physical self, and one absolutely can and will impact the other.

The bottom line is this: there is nothing wrong with seeking out the help you need to make sure you can be your whole self, both at work and in life. Being a healthy human being is an important part of being an adult, whether that means carving out a bit of alone time, choosing to go to sleep over going out, making smart food and exercise choices, seeking balance, or seeking out the support and guidance of others, professional or otherwise.

Here are some questions to ask yourself to get started:

- When was I at my best, in college? How can I incorporate some of those strategies as a young professional?
- When do I feel like my energy is highest, during the day? How can I start to capitalize on that?
- What are 2-3 healthy life habits I could start to incorporate over the next month?

Building Community and Finding Your People

Probably the biggest thing you're worried about right now, more so than work, or sleep, or time, or going to the gym, is how you will find friends as an adult. And that is a totally reasonable concern! Finding friends as an adult is hard. No longer are you surrounded by people your same age, going through a shared experience like you did in college. No longer are there programs and events planned just for you, with the sole purpose of connecting you to other people. This is work that you now have to do on your own, for yourself. Consider it your adult activities fair, if you will.

First, you may have moved someplace like DC or New York with a large population of Wake Forest alumni, and maybe even some of your friends moved there, too. In fact, if you're in one of these places, likely you are sharing living quarters with multiple roommates. This may seem like a drag, but actually will help you in the long run in terms of

expanding your network and giving you a built-in social system. There is power in numbers, after all. This doesn't mean that you have to spend all your time together. In fact, try to carve out some alone time each week, in whatever ways you can do that. And, you don't want to become so insular that you're only hanging out with people you already know. The point of post-graduate life is to expand your universe, not to constrict it.

Second, you may have moved to one of these places and still not know anyone, or you may have moved to a place without a large built-in population of Wake Forest people. No matter your situation, you need to figure how to meet (other) people. And then you need to figure out how to meet people with whom you actually want to spend time. And that means putting yourself in situations that allow you to meet people, which, for some of you, will push you way out of your comfort zone.

For a period of time, say six months to a year, make a pact with yourself that you will say yes to as many things as possible, as long as it feels safe. If someone invites you to a party and you don't know any of the other people who will be there, say yes, and commit to staying at least an hour and meeting at least one other person. If someone at work invites you out to lunch, say yes. Seek out opportunities to join organizations, to volunteer, to go to book readings, or other similar opportunities that put you in connection with other people, and that force you actually to talk to people.

Now, you might be thinking, *this seems weird, this isn't how I made friends growing up!* Isn't it though? You were put in a play group, or you joined a team, or you spent your Saturdays volunteering, or you were part of a youth group, or you went to college and joined organizations. Each of these activities had a purpose, and each of these activities had a by-product, which was you meeting people who might share your interests. This doesn't mean that you have to like everyone you meet, or that everyone you meet is going to be a long-term friend. But somewhere in there you will find one or two. Worst-case scenario, you may find a group or a cause or a social event that you actually enjoy.

Listen. This isn't going to be hard forever. A year from now, you will have people in your life you can't imagine haven't been there the whole time. But it does take time. Relationships are work, and they aren't built overnight. The best things rarely are.

At a certain point you will also need to think about those professional relationships you will need to develop in order to progress in your career. You need to look for mentors, sponsors, and wise counselors who can help you navigate your workplace, your career choices, and your next steps. The first three months isn't the time to do this work. It *is* the time to start paying attention to who might fill those roles in the future, and to cultivate relationships with your colleagues.

Just like with your personal relationships, this isn't work that's done overnight. It's an ongoing process of demonstrating genuine interest in your colleagues and their lives (even though you may feel like you don't have a lot in common with them), engaging with them over a cup of coffee or at a work social event, seeking their feedback and advice, and looking for ways you can contribute to their goals and work. Don't discount the value of these interactions! This is where you build real, formative relationships with the people who can and will support you down the road. By demonstrating that you genuinely care about them, now, you give them reason to care about you, later.

Making the Most of Your First 90 Days – In Life

Just like in your professional life, you need to give yourself some grace when it comes to navigating the transition you are going through, personally. Moving to a new place, learning how to make friends, and trying to figure out where you belong, are unsettling experiences, to say the least. Not to mention managing the day-to-day basics of getting around, buying groceries and doing meal prep, paying bills and taking out the trash, and finding time to relax and recharge. This is the time to remind yourself, *you have been here before*. When you arrived at college, you had to figure out the rules of behavior, how to make new friends, where you belonged, how to manage your time and your priorities, and how to take care of your wellbeing. It may have looked and felt a little different, but you did it. You have everything you need in you, right now, to successfully navigate this transition, as well.

That said, there is nothing wrong with learning from others. So here are some tips on how to make the most of the first three months post-college, in life.

1. **Get comfortable with discomfort.** You've read this several times, now, but you need to walk into this transition period expecting it to be hard, challenging, and uncomfortable. That doesn't mean it has to be bad! Challenging experiences can be great experiences. So don't spend all your energy trying to fight it, or filling up your time with busy-ness so that you won't have to face it. There are great things to be learned about yourself and others in this moment. Learn how to be alone with yourself and your thoughts. Figure out what is most challenging to you during this time, and create strategies to address it. Pay attention to how you are feeling as much as what you are doing. This won't be, after all, the last time that you are in this place. Next time, you want to remember what you learned, so you can put it into practice.
2. **Get selfish.** Be stingy with your time, your money, and your health. This is the time to learn that no one is going to tell you what to do with these three important elements. No one is going to tell you to get a good night's sleep, or to be sure to get regular exercise, or to stick to a budget, or to protect your free time. Why not? Because everyone else is trying to figure out their own stuff and they expect you to be an adult and to handle yours. You have to do this work for yourself. And, the first three months that you are someplace new are some of the best time to do this work, because you won't have as many people or obligations competing for your time and attention as you will down the road. Start to build great habits, now, and you will be better able to sustain them in the future.
3. **Join groups.** For you extroverts, this one is going to be a cinch. But even if you are on the far end of the introvert spectrum, it's still important to get out there and connect with people. Find one or two activities that align with your interests and give you energy, and which put you in contact with other people. Sometimes the

best time to meet new people is when you yourself are new to a place. You're much more likely to be vulnerable and to put yourself out there, now, than when you have gotten comfortable and developed a persona for yourself. Is there something you've always wanted to try but have been a little afraid to? Now's the time to try it! Go join that writing group or outdoor pursuits club or pickup soccer game. What do you have to lose?

- 4. Build relationships.** Along those lines, the first three months are a perfect time to be intentional about building both personal and professional relationships. Reach out to people for curiosity conversations – basically grown-up informational interviews – to learn about their paths and stories. Say yes to coffee and lunch invites, and reciprocate in kind. Say yes to people who are extending a hand your way. Chances are they're looking for a friend, too.
- 5. Ask for help.** Finally, just like with your career, don't be afraid to ask people for help with the life things. We all need other people to help us to be successful, to find meaning and purpose, and to expand our social networks. There is great value in learning from other people's experiences, in asking how they have managed their time, learned to build community, or even in the smaller details like, where the best gym is or, where to go to the dentist. Being an adult doesn't mean going it alone. Not one other person around you has gotten where they are without other people's help. Ask for guidance and remember to pay it forward when you are able.

While you should work to expand your network post-college, always remember that the Wake Forest community is here to support you, professionally and personally, on-campus and where you live. This is one of the perks of going to a school like Wake Forest: a vast community of Demon Deacons who want to help you succeed and thrive!

The Next Part

The transition from college to work and life after college is both exciting and unsettling, and sometimes it can seem like you don't know where to turn for answers, help, and guidance as you make your way through. Hopefully by now it's clear that you have a whole community of resources available to you, both where you live, online, and back on campus. This is what being a Wake Forest alumnus is all about! Take some time with this transition, and give yourself the time and the grace that you need to walk through it intentionally and with care for yourself. No one expects you to have it all figured out on day one, even though sometimes it can feel that way. Most of us are *still* figuring it out, years down the road.

Once you get past these first few months, check out *Five For Your First Five*, the five key competency areas which we have identified as critical to your success in work and in life in your first five years post-graduation. You will find tools and resources on our website (alumni.opcd.wfu.edu/your-first-five/), in-person and online mentoring groups you can join to process the experience and build your community, webinars and an online course, as well as a book which explores these areas more in-depth. In these five areas you won't find *everything* you need to know; no such book or resource exists! But after years of research and work with young professionals just like you, we feel quite confident that if you master these five areas, you will be well on your way to a successful post-college experience.

So, what are the five areas? They are briefly explained, below.

Do the Work. The first competency area is all about gaining real work experience. The first few years out of college can feel particularly jarring as the day-to-day realities of entry-level jobs collide with preconceived expectations of what that experience would look or feel like. How do you take ownership for your experience and make sure you are getting out of it what you should be? How do you start to build your post-college résumé? How do you claim your voice and your space within your organization? These questions are explored here. Your first job is a critical time to start discovering strengths, interests, and skills for the future. This is also the time to start examining what you do and don't like about work and how these relate to where you want to be in the future. First and foremost, everything during this time of transition starts and ends with the work you do and how you do it.

Build a Life. The second competency area is about creating positive life habits. Some of these are practical issues around finances, retirement planning, and health and well-being. But others are a bit less obvious. These include questions like how you will spend your time when it is completely your own? How do you find and create hobbies? What are those individual personal habits you value, and how will you prioritize those in an already-full day? What happens when things don't go exactly as you had planned them, and there is no safety net? This competency area explores these questions and identifies strategies you can put into practice.

Create Community. Related to this point, competency area three is all about building community. We all need to feel like we belong to a place. However long you *intend* to live somewhere, you need to *live where you live*. That means putting down roots, joining groups, and building intentional relationships. It means adopting an attitude of permanence. Just like the ability to choose *how* you spend your time, as an adult you also get to choose *with whom* you spend that time. And it's so critical – both personally *and* professionally – that you make the choices that are right for you, choosing people who align with your values and interests. Creating community means finding adult friends, being intentional about who you are letting into your life and why, and building a robust, diverse network of mentors and wise counselors who can help you to explore the decisions and choices you are making.

Practice Reflection. In competency area four we explore the power of reflection and lifelong learning. Really, this entire model is about encouraging you to be reflective: reflecting on the choices and decisions you are making, why you are making them, and what you are learning about yourself along the way. This is such a valuable part of your growth and development as an adult that we have built intentional reflective strategies into each of the five competency areas to encourage you to begin this practice. Mentoring relationships, in particular, are all about reflective practices, taking intentional stock of where you are, where you have been, and where you are headed. In this competency area you will look at how you can seek out and build these relationships, as well as how you can practice mindfulness, be open to feedback, and identify your strengths and opportunities for growth.

Own What's Next. Finally, competency area five looks at how to take each of these intentional practices into your future. At some point during the next few years you will likely be forced to choose between safety, comfort, and known success; and uncertainty, risk, and potential failure. This may be a choice you seek out, based on what you have learned about yourself, your values, your strengths, and your skills. Or, you may have an opportunity that appears unexpectedly, maybe even before you think you are ready for it. Either way, you can and should start to do some planning now, to put yourself in the best possible position to assess these choices when they appear. In this competency area you will do some intentional preparation for what comes next, in your career and in your life.

So that's it. *Your First Five*. On the face of it, it's not so challenging. But we all need a helping hand along the way. None of us can be successful in a vacuum, and we all need other people to guide us, challenge us, and open doors for us. You are no different! Seek out the help that you need, whether it's from Wake Forest, from your new colleagues, from your friends and family, or others. No matter what, know that there is a whole community of people who are in your corner, supporting you and cheering you on. Welcome to the Wake Forest alumni community! We are thrilled that you are here.

ALUMNI PERSONAL + CAREER DEVELOPMENT CENTER

Our mission is to educate Wake Forest alumni on how to successfully navigate their personal and professional lives after college. We provide knowledge, tools, resources, and opportunities for connection for our alumni as they work, build their lives, and make decisions about what comes next.

Visit our website at alumni.opcd.wfu.edu to find additional resources and subscribe to our enewsletter, Beyond the Forest. Follow us on Instagram at [@LifeAfterWake](https://www.instagram.com/LifeAfterWake).

ALLISON E. MCWILLIAMS, PHD



Allison E. McWilliams is Assistant Vice President, Mentoring and Alumni Personal & Career Development, at Wake Forest University. She leads and provides training, support, guidance, and resources for mentoring relationships and personal and career development programs for college students, faculty and staff, alumni, and external audiences. She has written for, and spoken to national and international audiences about effective mentoring strategies, leadership, and professional development. She is a proud Wake Forest alumna!