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Don't let past mistakes limit your future health career

If you're worried that something you did in the past might haunt you in your future health career, take steps to minimize the damage.

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Have you ever:

"One in ten college admissions officers and 15% of medical school admissions staff have visited social networking sites to learn more about their applicants."

- ▶ Exaggerated your accomplishments on a job application or resume?
- ▶ Lied about a bad grade?
- ▶ Been arrested for a crime, such as stealing or property damage?
- ▶ Appeared in a photo online drinking alcohol, taking drugs or doing anything someone might find "inappropriate"?

Everyone makes mistakes. Most of the time, they are soon forgotten. But some mistakes can follow you throughout your life, closing doors to educational and employment opportunities.

If you're worried that something you did in the past might come back to haunt you in your future health career, here are steps you can take to minimize the damage.

Be honest about your errors

Lying about a past mistake just makes everything worse. People rarely lose their jobs because of something they did in the past. They get fired because they lied about it.

Providing false information on a job or college application can be grounds for dismissal – even if the lie isn't discovered for years. Inaccurate employment dates, incorrect job titles, or an inflated GPA might make you seem like a great catch now, but even "little white lies" could end your career down the road.

Verify public records about you

You may be telling the truth about your past, but public records could be telling a whole different story. If you have a fairly common name, you could get the blame for mistakes you never made.

Take the time to verify public information about you, before a college admissions officer or prospective employer comes across it. Order copies of your own public records, and correct any errors you find in:

- ▶ High school and college transcripts
- ▶ Your credit report – you can request a free copy every year from all three reporting agencies at www.annualcreditreport.com
- ▶ Your driving record
- ▶ Criminal records, if any
- ▶ Military records
- ▶ State licensing records

Call your prior employers and ask if you are eligible for rehire. Ask your personal and professional references what they plan to say about you. Put yourself in the shoes of a hiring manager, and make sure the public record is a complete and accurate reflection of you.

Scrub your online presence

Grandpa used to say, "Never say or do anything you wouldn't want to see on the front page of the New York Times." Today, bad behavior is more likely to be broadcast on Facebook or MySpace.

Students often are shocked to learn that college admissions officers and potential employers routinely "Google" applicants and search your name on Facebook and MySpace. It might seem like an invasion of privacy, but they can only see photos and posts that are publicly available. Writing on a friend's wall is just like writing on a real wall – anyone can see it.

According to a recent Kaplan survey, one in ten college admissions officers and 15% of medical school admissions staff have visited social networking sites to learn more about their applicants. More than a third of the time, what they found gave them a negative impression of the applicant.

Other studies have found 40%-75% of employers go online to research potential employees. It's perfectly legal, as long as they don't use online information to discriminate based on age, gender, race/ethnicity, religion or disability.

Consider your online presence an extension of your official applications for college or career. Make sure your profile, wall posts, online groups and images reflect positively on you.

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