In thinking about what advice to offer students, I spent a lot of time thinking about what I wish I had known when I was getting started. The list really is very simple – just two main ideas which I’m going to share with you below.

Your success depends on the relationships you nurture.

I used to be in awe of the connected people I knew – meaning people who had vast networks of contacts and could connect you with just the right person – until I finally learned that networking is just building relationships. Go to social and professional events, and start conversations with new people. Take a genuine interest in the people you meet, listen more than you speak, and go out of your way to help others. You’ll naturally develop a network of people who are happy to help you out, just because you took the time to get to know them and to help them when you had the chance.

1a. Be nice to EVERYONE.

Some years ago, I was in an informal meeting with Rob, my supervisor, when a janitor stepped in to empty the trashcan. Rob greeted the janitor like a friend and asked how her day was going. It was a brief but warm conversation. After the janitor left, Rob turned to me and said, “A lot of people think janitors are below them, but the truth is they run this building. They know where everything is and can get you anything you need. Don’t ever make the mistake of thinking someone is below you. Be nice to everyone.” Take it to heart, and be nice to everyone!

1b. Don’t waste your life online.

There are some wonderful tools online that can help you stay in contact with people you meet, but it’s far too easy to get sucked into long debates online,
clicking from one link to another, or posting photos. Before you know it, you’ve lost an hour or two from your day on things that don’t help you reach your goals. Be cautious about how much time you’re spending online and how you’re using it. You’ll build a more meaningful professional network from in-person interactions; those are the relationships that will give you a hand-up when you need it or help you find a new job. LinkedIn, Facebook and other platforms can be good tools to help you maintain relationships with people you’ve gotten to know in real life, but remember: nothing beats face-to-face contact.

Set goals, but don’t assume your life is going to go according to plan.

You need a plan to reach your goals, but you can assume that your plan will need frequent re-evaluation and adjustment. Things probably are NOT going to go exactly according to your plan.

Examples of a plan going sideways include having a child, parent or spouse who needs medical care which prevents you from having a job, not being able to get a position in your field or at the salary you expected, or realizing you really don’t like your career field and you want to change direction.

If you remember that your plan isn’t a guarantee, you’ll take fewer risks and come out ahead in the long run.

The biggest risk I would recommend against is debt, including student loans. When I was a student, several people I respected believed it was better to take out loans rather than work your way through college. My student loans are one of my biggest regrets! I can’t say it strongly enough - avoid debt of all kinds. If you’re debt-free, you’ll have more flexibility to handle whatever life throws at you and to accept life-changing opportunities that come your way.