

GETTING A HEAD START ON YOUR CAREER SUCCESS

Career Planning



SECTION I: PLANNING YOUR CAREER

Choosing a major or career direction is one of the most important decisions a college student makes. Some students believe that there is only one right major or career and, therefore, endure much anxiety over the decision. Some students are reluctant to make decisions, being fearful of making the "wrong" decision while others just don't know where to start. Some feel pressured to choose a major or career suggested or valued by parents, friends, or teachers. Others are influenced by popular culture; for example, choosing a major in chemistry in order to become a crime scene investigator, while others want to know what majors lead toward high demand and high paying jobs.

In reality, there are probably several majors and careers that could be right for you. Most students have many interests and much potential. The key to choosing a major or career is to discover what really "turns you on" – captures your interests, uses your abilities, motivates you, makes you feel happy, and provides you with the skills you need for the future.

You will discover what majors/careers are best for you by giving yourself adequate time to reflect, assess, explore, evaluate and complete a planning and decision-making process.

Begin by doing the following:

1. *Make a list of the majors or career fields you have considered – currently or in the past.* What are the common themes among these majors or careers?



2. ***Assess your interests.*** The more similar your interests are to a work environment and the people employed in a career field, the greater success and satisfaction you are likely to experience. What activities appeal to you – whether you have done them or not? What subjects in school have you most enjoyed and why? What extra-curricular activities interest you? How do you prefer to spend your leisure time? What aspects of your jobs have you most enjoyed? Review your lists of appealing activities for common themes. For example, do you prefer to solve problems by doing; by thinking; by creating; by helping; by persuading; or by organizing? The Interests Worksheet (cited in references) provides a framework for organizing your interests into themes based on John Holland’s Vocational Theory. Using the Holland code derived from this exercise, you can consult a number of resources that will suggest major/career options.
3. ***Identify the work and personal values that are most important to you.*** For your work and personal life choices to be most satisfying, they must be compatible with your values. For example, some people may place a higher value on the amount of money they earn while others may rate meaningful and purposeful work as their top priority. One way to identify work values is to think about work-related experiences; and assess what it was about the working conditions, the purpose of the work you were doing, and the relationships at work that contributed most/least to your feelings of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Sometimes, the work experience we disliked the most provides clues about the values that we were missing. How do you think your most important personal values (e.g., good health, close friendships, spirituality, having children) will affect your choice of major or career? The Values exercise (cited in references) will help you clarify important work and personal values. Try to identify the five to six most important work and personal values that will influence your decisions and actions in the future.
4. ***Your skills, combined with your interests and values, are the keys to career planning success.*** Uncovering clues to the skills you especially enjoy using will help you decide what majors and careers are best for you. Every job requires certain skills based on the functions performed (e.g., communicating, analyzing), specific knowledge of a subject, procedure or vocabulary (e.g., speaking Spanish, programming in C++), and personality characteristics (e.g., trustworthiness, flexibility). One way to identify your skills is to write detailed descriptions of 10 experiences that made you feel proud or satisfied. The experiences may be academic, work-related, or personal. Then, go back through the descriptions and highlight the words or phrases that represent the skills used. The Skills exercises (cited in references) provide examples of skills that can serve as a skills checklist. Review the highlighted skills and circle those you most enjoyed using. In addition,



make a list of subject matter or knowledge areas that interest you (e.g., favorite subjects in school, topics you enjoy reading about). Finally, make a list of the adjectives that you or others who know you well would use to describe your personal qualities. What would you or others say about your strengths and performance in work, school, leisure or volunteer experiences?

5. ***Create a profile or summary using what you have learned about your interests, values and skills.*** Use this as a reference when you begin exploring major and career options. Use the profile to answer the frequently asked question, "Can you tell me about yourself?" If you are still somewhat confused about your profile or how to respond to the question, ask a career counselor or advisor for assistance. Discuss taking other self-assessment inventories. Ask a career counselor or advisor to help identify resources pertaining to majors and careers based on your profile.

6. ***Choose three to five majors or careers that are of most interest to you from the list.***

7. ***Now begin your research on each.*** Compile a list of questions to help you evaluate the options. When researching majors, read about their requirements in the university catalog or on the university web site. Contact the academic advising office and ask for course planning guides and resources for exploring majors and careers. The career center is the best resource for print and online career materials. You may also find career resources at the public library and in the reference section of a bookstore. When researching on the Internet, use a search engine or visit recommended web sites, such as those cited by the career center. One of the best sources of information about a major or career is people: students in majors you are considering, faculty members, and professionals in careers of interest to you. Check with the career center or alumni affairs office for a list of of professionals who have volunteered to share career information and advice with students.

8. ***Develop a plan of action to help you achieve your goals.*** Your action plan should address the when, what, where, and how of achieving these goals. For example: What are the steps or strategies required to achieve your goals? What resources will you need and how do you find them? What courses are best to take and when? What student organizations or clubs should you join? What type of internship is best and where would you find it? When will you need a resume and how do you prepare a good one? What are the obstacles you may encounter and how do you remove or minimize them?



As you explore major and career options, keep in mind that there are other important personal factors considered by employers before hiring. Employers are able to use the Internet to uncover the backgrounds of potential candidates and their activities on social networks, sometimes called “digital dirt.” Additionally, a growing number of employers are using drug tests to reduce the possibility of hiring a drug user. Some Federal agencies and many think tanks, research facilities, and organization that have contracts or grants with the Federal government may also require security clearances for individuals they hire. Some of the factors considered in a clearance investigation include: excessive use of alcohol, criminal conduct, drug use, problems with credit and debts, misuse of information technology (including music downloads), outside activities, and personal conduct.

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SECTION II: TEST DRIVING YOUR CAREER WITH AN INTERNSHIP

Participating in an internship is like “test-driving a new car.” Internships provide you an opportunity to discover if your major or career is right for you without a long-term commitment. An internship is often project-oriented work that provides you with practical knowledge and first-hand experience in a particular field of study.

Internships allow you to learn in a real work environment. You can intern in a variety of settings including business, law, social sciences, entertainment and the arts, health professions, and science and technology.

There are many advantages to gaining internship experience prior to graduation, including opportunities to:

1. Test out and confirm or reshape your career goals
2. Develop skills that enhance your qualifications for future full-time employment
3. Make contacts in your field
4. Possibly gain an offer of full-time employment upon graduation



Internships may be either paid or unpaid. Many internship opportunities for first and second year students are unpaid work assignments, and academic credit is usually encouraged. If you are interested in receiving academic credit, you should speak to an advisor in your academic department. Each academic department has its own policies on whether or not it will grant academic credit for an internship. At the end of the day, remember that it's all about getting career-related work experience and building a network of career contacts.

Paid internships are typically highly competitive. The general rule of thumb is that the higher the pay, the greater the competition is for the position. For example, internships on Wall Street in Investment Banking require a great deal of preparation, knowledge, and competence. In return for the long hours and hard work, students are highly compensated by the firms.

Internship experience is one thing employers consider when hiring college graduates. In fact, many companies expect students to have an internship in their field before they apply for a full-time position. According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), internship programs are now ranked as the number-one way companies find entry-level employees.

A great way to start locating internship opportunities is to visit with the career services office. They have many resources, including internship listings, directories and websites. Another place to visit is your academic department. Professors and academic advisors generally have valuable contacts in their fields and should be a wonderful source of information. Classmates, friends, and family are also important sources for contacts, information and for career decision-making support.

Before your internship begins, develop a list of learning goals or objectives that you wish to accomplish during your internship position. For example, a communications student may want to learn how to write a press release. You may wish to use the Learning Objectives Worksheet (cited in references) to help you develop your learning goals. The more concrete your goals, the easier it will be to decide on the right internship for you. Remember to be realistic; your internship is an opportunity to observe the work environment and to learn relevant skills. You will also have the opportunity to perform some administrative work at any internship. Take even these routine duties seriously, as they provide an opportunity for supervisors to view how you treat your work. At the same time, learn the business, enjoy the environment, take the initiative to request more demanding projects once you complete the required tasks, and don't fear mistakes. Interns have been known to work on some exciting projects. Don't be afraid to ask for more responsibility!



The most important aspects of the internship experience are to learn about the work, the organization, your co-workers, the people served by the organization, and yourself. Approach the experience with a sense of humor and a positive attitude. Have fun! Ultimately, through the internship, you will learn more about yourself personally and you will be developing yourself professionally.

After your internship, continue to network, network, and network more. Remember to keep in touch with your supervisor and co-workers. At some time in the future, they may have a summer or even a full-time job to offer, or they may know of others who are hiring. Finally, remember to add your internship to your resume as soon as you finish the experience, if not before.

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SECTION III: CREATING THE PACKAGE

Regardless of the major you choose, your college experience offers an opportunity to develop and demonstrate attributes and competencies that will help you land a good job. Employers who hire college graduates look for good grade-point-averages and desirable qualities and skills such as: oral and written communication, honesty and integrity, ability to relate to others, strong work ethic, teamwork, analytical skills, motivation and initiative, flexibility and adaptability, and technology competency. One way to develop and practice these qualities and skills is through an internship, Co-op position or relevant part-time employment. An internship may also help you confirm or modify your major and career goals. A second way to develop and practice your skills is through leadership positions in student organizations, intercollegiate sports, and other extra-curricular activities.

Major and career planning begins with the questions: Who am I? What are my options? What's best for me? How do I attain my goals? Finding the answers to these questions puts you in charge and allows you to design your own future.

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