



Guide to Exploring Majors

CAREER MANAGEMENT CENTER

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ASU Career Management Center's Guide to Exploring Majors and Careers

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Introduction

If you are reading this handout, then you probably either are:

- unsure about your major
- unsure about what you really want to do when you graduate
- both of the above

Don't feel bad if that is the case – actually, everyone is undecided about what to do with their life at some point. Nationally, we see statistics quoted that as many as 80% of all college students change their major or that the average college student changes his/her major an average of 3-5 times. If you were able to count how many times students change their mind about what they want to do after graduation, it would be much higher.

You are embarking on the journey that will lead to a career that is right for you. There is a lot of pressure right now to know what you want to do and how you plan to do it. The idea of choosing something today that will define the rest of your life may be overwhelming. So don't worry about lifelong commitments right now. Use this time to explore and make a mistake or two. Try to focus on what you are going to do for the first 2-3 years after you leave ASU. Keep in mind that most people pursue careers in fields that are unrelated to their college majors; the fact that you were successful in college and the skills and experiences you gained while in college are generally more important to an employer than the specific degree you earned. College helps you begin your professional working career and educates you to be a better citizen but does not pigeonhole you for life.

In the initial stages of decision-making, you want to determine what question you are trying to answer. After you determine this, you can plan a course of action.

1. Are you looking for a career?

People who desire to invest time in preparing for a specific career may choose a major to support their choice. For example, someone who wants to become a doctor may choose a science-based major to prepare for graduate work in medical school.

2. Are you searching for a major?

People who are focused on choosing a major may have interest in a variety of careers. While some majors, such as nursing, may prepare you to enter specific areas of nursing, a broader major, such as psychology, could prepare you to enter a multitude of different careers.

We all have a different way of approaching our careers, and we each need to find our OWN style of arriving at decisions. As you consider the tremendous impact of your future decision, remember that no test can tell you what you should do. No person can tell you what to do. The decision is YOURS to make.

This handout will walk you through some basic principles of choosing a major or career including decision making, the relationship between majors and careers, a variety of activities you can do, and some suggestions about next steps for you.

Career Decision Making

You walk into the grocery store looking for chocolate. What do you find? A variety to choose from. You have tried each kind at least a dozen times. Do you want the one with the least calories or the most sugar? Which one would your mother recommend? Your friend walks up to you and asks, “Have you made a decision yet? I’m ready to go!”

So many factors can influence a person’s decision-making style. While some people will choose to evaluate their interests, abilities, skills, and values and then begin planning a career, other people may choose to follow the advice of family, friends, or other important persons in choosing a major. Still others may choose to not choose, making decisions as they go along. Once a student enters college, he or she may begin to gain experiences in various areas through coursework, volunteering, part-time jobs, and internships. Professors and advisors may become additional influences on a student’s decision. The pressure builds...

By identifying the factors influencing your ability or inability to make a decision, as well as your natural decision-making style, you will be better able to focus on your development as a future employee. What does an employer look for in an employee? How can you gain experience and complete meaningful coursework?

TYPES OF DECISION MAKING

Which of the following types best describes the way you are approaching your choice?

- Impulsive**—Do you tend to put little thought or examination into your decision? Do you choose the first option without considering alternatives?
- Fatalistic**—Do you allow your environment or situation determine your decision? Do you leave decisions up to fate?
- Compliant**—Do you allow someone else to decide? Do you follow someone else’s idea of the best alternative for your future?
- Delaying**—Do you tend to declare a moratorium, postponing all thought and action, until you decide to implement your decision?
- Agonizing**—Do you get lost in the factual information and get overwhelmed with analyzing alternatives?
- Intuitive**—Do you make a choice based on a “gut” feeling about the best alternative?
- Paralysis**—Do you accept a need to choose but cannot seem to approach your decision?
- Planning**—Do you weight the facts and choose the result that will be the most satisfying? Do you embark on a rational process, balancing cognitive and emotional needs?

As you embark on your decision-making process, you should be aware of what type of decision maker you are to aid in narrowing your search. As you read through the list of decision makers, remember that a decision-making strategy is not good or bad, right or wrong, in itself. You may utilize different strategies for different situations, in different times, and with different people, during your life.

Major Choosing & Career Planning

Many students assume that, when choosing a major, they are choosing a career for the rest of their life. While this is true for some, it is certainly not universal. In fact, most people not only have many jobs, but also many occupations, over the course of their working lives. As mentioned before, many people embark on careers that are not directly related to their major. For example, this author studied drama as an undergraduate, but is now preparing for a career as a career counselor, after having worked in higher education for a number of years!

DEFINING TERMS

Before moving further, it is important to distinguish between similar terms, like occupations, careers, and jobs, or degrees and majors. Often, we use these terms interchangeably, but in reality, they are quite different from one another.

Occupation: You can think of an occupation as a set of tasks that employees are paid to perform, such as a librarian or a news editor. Employees that perform essentially the same tasks are in the same occupation.

Job: A job is a specific set of duties with a particular employer that an employee performs, such as the business librarian for Dean B. Ellis Library. The concept of a job is much narrower than an occupation.

Career: A career can comprise both jobs and occupations. Careers are essentially a series of work-related activities that we perform over the course of our lives. Peoples' careers today are typically comprised of many jobs, and even multiple occupations.

Degree: May be liberal arts (B.A. or B.S.) or professional (B.S.E.E., B.S.B.A, B.S.W.) in focus. Liberal arts degrees are typically more broad, preparing you for a wide array of careers. Professional degrees are more narrow in focus, as they are preparing you to enter a specific career upon graduation. All degrees have some component of general education coursework, as well as more specific coursework that is focused on the major area of study. Professional degrees typically have less general education courses.

Major: A primary area of study within a degree (B.A. in English or B.S. in Biology).

Dual Degree: Two separate degrees, usually from different academic divisions or colleges (B.A. in English and B.S. J. in Broadcast).

Double Major: Two majors with the same degree within the same division (B.A. in English and B.A. in Theater—both are in the College of Arts & Science).

Minor: A secondary area of study that may be a compliment to a major area (B.A. in English and Minor in Political Science). Not all departments offer minors. Requires a minimum of 15 credits (some more).

CHOOSING A MAJOR, PLANNING A CAREER

There is a difference between trying to choose a major and planning a career. Though related, some of the subtle differences are described below.

It can be very valuable to learn to make the connection between your major and a career. The Career Center offers some excellent print resources in order to help you get started! Suggested readings include the Great Jobs series, College Majors and Careers, The College Majors Handbook, The College Board Guide to 150 Popular College Majors, and Majoring in the Rest of Your Life. Also check out the What Can I Do With a Major In section at <http://career.missouri.edu>. These resources provide a number of possibilities when examining potential careers that could result from your major. Sometimes the connection is not as obvious, though.

Choosing a major means choosing an academic program of study for the next one to four years. At this university, students are preferred to choose a major by the end of their sophomore year (or after having reached 60 credit hours). However, although you may have then declared a major, that does not necessarily mean that you are decided.

Also, there are many different potential combinations of majors, minors, and degrees that present additional options, marketability, and education. In the end, though, there are a finite number of majors to choose from. You are advised to meet regularly with your advisor to decide what options/combination is best for you.

Even after selecting a major, you may not be sure about what occupation you would like to pursue. You might not even be sure if that is the “right” major for you. That’s okay! When selecting a major, think about what interests and excites you, what you would enjoy studying until graduation, and what would give you the employment options you would like to have after graduation. Use the first two years of your college experience to help you decide what you want to get out of your major and your career. All majors provide the opportunity to learn the transferable skills that employers are looking for, such as analysis, communication, team work, and time management.

Planning a career is an ongoing process that there is no real deadline for. Most likely, these decisions will be somewhat tentative; as you may change your path once you begin working. You can increase your chances of choosing a career that’s the best fit for you by “testing the waters” before graduation. By gaining targeted experience through part-time jobs, volunteering, or internships during college, you can experience first-hand what a career and its working environment is like. If you know that you are interested in pursuing a profession that requires specific preparation or additional graduate education, such as law, dentistry, or physical therapy, choosing a major will likely be closely linked to choosing a career. However, if you are one of the many students who is pursuing a liberal arts education, choosing a major is a small part of planning your career because you will have many career options. In fact, unlike the finite number of majors available, there are almost an infinite number of job opportunities.

Career Exploration Activities

Making choices about your major or career path will come easier to some than others and will be easier at certain points of your life than others. When you are having difficulty moving forward with your decision, try spending some time and effort on the following activities. These activities are separated into four major categories of ways you can best spend your time in this process: learn about yourself, investigate ASU academic degree programs, research occupational information, and gain experience.

LEARN ABOUT YOURSELF

Chances are, you are looking for a career path or major that will capture your interests; utilize your strengths, abilities, and skills; and match with your values. It makes sense, then, that to do so, you have to have a good idea about your interests, strengths, abilities, skills, and values. Below are some activities that will help you learn more about yourself.

Talk with someone. Many people who surround you can be great resources for you, including but not limited to your family, friends, faculty members, academic advisors, and professionals in fields you are drawn to. At the ASU Career Center, you can talk with a Career Specialist at any time we are open without an appointment or with a Career Counselor by appointment. Talking with someone at the ASU Career Center can also help you further explore any of the following activities.

Take a self-assessment. This is a very easy and obvious activity. You can take the Self-Directed Search, Discover, or the Jungian Personality Assessment by visiting the Counseling Center or meet with a Career Specialist at the ASU Career Management Center by simply dropping by any time we are open and take the Sigi3.

Take a Career Explorations course. If you are nearing the beginning of the Fall or Winter semesters and want a structured environment in which to learn about yourself, you should consider taking this 1 credit hour class.

Activity—career lifeline. Sometimes, in order to look forward, we need to first look back. The following exercise is designed to help you do just that. On a separate page, draw a line like the one below that represents your “Career Lifeline.” Think of the line as your life, extending from birth until the end of your life-career. Place an “X” on where you are right now in your life (for most of you, that will be about 1/4 of the way across the line). To the left of the “X,” list all of the factors and influences that have shaped your career decisions up until this point: activities, events, experiences, influential people...no matter how big or how small. Then, to the right of the “X,” list all of the things you would like to happen, or that you think are likely to happen, in your life-career. After you’re done, reflect on the experience. What factors were most influential? Who has helped you in the past? What does the future look like?



Activity—occupational dreams. Think about different occupations you have dreamed about doing, regardless of how unrealistic or impractical they seem now. What careers did you admire as a child? Did you dream about being a police officer, a doctor, an astronaut? What was intriguing to you about those occupations? Would you ever consider pursuing these occupations? What influenced your decision to further pursue or not pursue these options? Rank the occupations from 1 (most like to explore) to 5 (least like to explore).

Though they seem less formal than traditional career-planning methods, your occupational dreams can be one of the best predictors of your future career. Could any of your occupational dreams be “doable?” Consider learning more about them through research or job shadowing to see if your image of the career matches the reality. If they’re all pretty unrealistic, think about what it is that interests you in the profession. Are there other career choices that have similar characteristics but that are more practical?

Occupation	What you liked about it	Why you are or are not pursuing this occupation	Rank

Reflect on meaningful questions. Think about the following questions, along with questions that follow in the Interests; Strengths, Abilities, and Skills; and Values sections.

- Why are you in college? What appealed to you about a college education?
- Who has influenced your ideas about choosing a major?
- What are the similarities and differences between the majors you are tentatively considering?
- What occupations are you considering?
- Why will these occupations provide the rewards and satisfactions you want from your career?
- What have been your favorite jobs?
- What were your favorite school subjects?
- What are your pet peeves?
- If you ran the world, what changes would you make?
- If you won a million dollars, what would you do with it?
- Who do you most admire in life and why?
- What tasks have brought you the most success?
- What tasks do you think you could do well that you haven’t done yet?

Explore your interests. Naturally, you'll want to choose a field that interests and excites you. However, even though it seems like it should be easy enough to come up with things that you like to do, it can actually be kind of overwhelming to list them out. Try to think about the kinds of things you enjoy doing and talking about on a day to day basis. Do you love being outdoors? Are you the most passionate about politics among your friends?

Use these questions to start brainstorming:

- What organizations are you involved in? What role do you play in each one?**
- What sort of classes do you enjoy taking? In which subjects do the readings or assignments seem enlightening and worthwhile rather than time-consuming?**
- Which subjects have you continued exploring beyond the requirements of a class?**
- What do you start conversations about?**
- What kind of books do you read for pleasure?**
- What TV stations, movies, internet sites, hobbies, or pastimes do you enjoy?**
- What do you like to do in your spare time?**
- What subjects come to mind when you daydream?**
- What job would you do for free?**

Interests, like skills, can easily be expanded by introducing yourself to new subjects, activities, and people. Luckily, college is an ideal environment for doing all three. You won't like everything you try, but with the right attitude you'll hopefully like having tried it.

Explore your strengths, abilities, and skills. You will also want to choose a field that you will be good at, whether it is due to naturally occurring abilities or skills you've learned.

Many skills, like communication and computer skills, are developed through day-to-day activities and can be transferred to other activities. Think about the ways in which the skills that you already have can be used more generally.

Also think about new skills you can develop that are related to the ones you already have. Skills can always be improved or acquired if you discover something new that you're interested in. Before you give up on the career of your dreams because you feel like you don't have the skills, put in the time and effort to improve them! The time you spend preparing is short compared to the years you'll spend in a challenging, rewarding career.

Ask yourself these questions to get started:

- Are there any subjects in school that you've always breezed through?**
- What do your friends come to you for help with? Physics problems? Papers? Conflicts in their personal lives?**
- What do you contribute in group work? Creative brainstorming? Organizational skills? Leadership?**
- In which areas are you comfortable and confident competing?**
- What do you like best about yourself? What do your friends like the best about you? What do you or your friends see as your limitations?**

Explore your Values. As you think about your future career, take your work-related values into consideration. Many new workers only consider the job title and job description when looking for a job. However, your values play a crucial role in your career satisfaction. See the list below for some examples. Try ranking your top 5-10 to the side.

Advancement	Moving up, making more money, having increased responsibility
Benefits	Health, medical, dental, retirement, vacation, paid sick leave, maternity leave
Challenge	Using your creativity, training, intelligence and other talents
Choice of Environment	Having the choice of indoor/outdoor, smoke free, organized, geographic mobility
Compatible Co-Workers	Having good friends at work, working with people who have similar interests
Competition	Striving for success, doing your best, competing with others
Contribution to Society	Being a useful member of the groups with which you identify, knowing you have accomplished things that will benefit others, making a lasting contribution
Creativity	Expressing yourself, achieving fulfillment from creating something yourself
Diversity	Having different tasks, using a variety of skills, working with a diverse group of people
Easy Commute	Driving a short distance to work
Excitement	Having fun at work, enjoying what you do, having a stimulating environment
Family Life	Having time to devote to personal relationships, having time with your family
Flexible Hours	Being able to work at your convenience
High Earnings	Significantly improving your financial position, obtaining those things money can buy
Independence	Having freedom to “do your own thing,” either on or off the job, having time flexibility, controlling your own actions, having autonomy
Moral Fulfillment	Maintaining your moral, ethical, and/or religious standards without conflict, being able to accept the goals, values, and standards of your organization
Leisure Time	Enjoying the company of others, making new friends, having time for hobbies
Leadership	Being in charge, having responsibility, leading others in a group
On the Job Training	Receiving training while at work to improve your skills, going to conferences
Power and Influence	Having the ability to influence or control others
Prestige and Status	Getting approval or attention from those whose opinions you respect, achieving status in line with your talents and achievements
Rewards	Having job satisfaction, receiving verbal praise, trips, new cars, raises, certificates
Security	Feeling safe, free of continual concern about dangers or unexpected and/or unpleasant changes, having the essentials you need, steady income
Travel	Going places, seeing the world, enjoying cultural experiences
Variety	Having many different job tasks, facing challenges rather than routines

INVESTIGATE ASU ACADEMIC DEGREE PROGRAMS

Be sure to do some research on what majors and minors ASU offers. Below are some ways you can do this. Be sure to also look at unique combinations of majors, minors, dual degrees, double majors, and special degree programs like the Interdisciplinary Degree.

Explore all the majors ASU has to offer. A complete listing of every major offered at ASU is available at <http://www2.astate.edu/registrar/>. Get started by looking for majors based on interest, by browsing majors alphabetically or by browsing majors by degree-granting school. This site also allows you to compare the requirements associated with each major.

Visit with Wilson Advisement Center advisors. The advisors in the Student Success Center are prepared to assist you with looking at multiple majors on campus and can help you find out how classes you have taken may apply to majors you are considering. See <http://www2.astate.edu/a/university-college/wilson-advising>

Go to your college and/or department advisors, faculty, and websites. Each school, college, and department will have information about their degree programs. Websites will have some of the current information, but for questions and a more personalized approach, turn to the faculty and advisors.

Go through the undergraduate catalog. The print and web versions of the undergraduate catalog have lists of degree programs at ASU. Try copying or printing this list, reading through each major, and placing * next to the ones that interest you or that you would like to learn more about. Afterwards, look back over your choices. Do you see any patterns or themes between the majors/minors you have starred? Go to <http://www2.astate.edu/registrar/> for the online version.

Talk to current students. You are bound to know someone in the degree programs you are investigating. See what they have to say, but remember that everyone holds his/her own opinion based on different criteria. Form your own opinion based on conversations with several students you trust.

Look into graduate school. Sometimes, you are not able to study exactly what you want as an undergraduate student. If you might be interested in graduate school, look into what those programs require for entry. Sometimes, you can get an undergraduate degree and a graduate degree in two different subjects in almost the same time it would take to get a double major/ dual degree.

Take exploratory courses. One of the best ways to explore a particular degree program is to take an exploratory course in that area. Be sure to meet with your advisor to be sure that the course will count toward your graduation. Even if it won't, it may be worth taking to see what you think of the subject area.

RESEARCH OCCUPATIONAL INFORMATION

It is likely that you are only really familiar with a few occupations. Most people have some idea of what people do in occupations they have experienced some direct contact with, such as what your parents or siblings do or what teachers do, but we generally don't know much about other occupations. The representations of occupations we see in the movies or TV may or may not be very accurate. It can be devastating to find out, after pursuing one occupation throughout college, that it wasn't what you thought it was. Take the time to research an occupation now to see what it really is like!

Read print resources. There are many great print resources available that can tell you about the typical work environment, work tasks, salary, job outlook, training needed, and much more. The Career Information Library in the ASU Career Management Center is a great place to start, but also look at Dean B. Ellis Library, the public library, and local bookstores for more information. At the ASU Career Management Center, look for books as well as the internet resources.

View internet resources. The internet offers great access to free information about occupations that is up-to-date. In addition to the sites listed below, do a simple search using your favorite search engine for information on occupations you are interested in. In addition, a Career Specialist at the ASU Career Management Center can explain how to get access to Sigi3, an online program with good occupational information. More good sites to check are below:

- The Occupational Outlook Handbook Online, <http://www.bls.gov/oco>
- O*Net, <http://online.onetcenter.org>
- The Dictionary of Occupational Titles, <http://www.oalj.dol.gov/libdot.htm>
- The ASU Career Management Center web site, <http://careers.astate.edu>

Talk to human resources. A variety of people can help you find information about occupations. In addition to the staff at the ASU Career Management Center, look for assistance from academic advisors, faculty members, librarians, and professionals in the field. More information follows about informational interviewing and job shadowing, two great ways to find out more information about an occupation by visiting an actual workplace.

Try job shadowing. Many times, you can follow a professional around work for a few hours or days by simply asking. There may be special circumstances with some professions where you will not be able to shadow an professional because of confidentiality issues, but most people like to share what they are working on with others interested in their field.

If you do ask to shadow someone, be sure to be specific about your intentions (to find out more information about the occupation, not to get a job with that organization), when you would like to shadow them, how long, and what you hope to gain. Be sure to get from the person you are shadowing specifics about when and where you are to meet them, what you should wear, if it is OK to take notes or pictures while you are there, and any other details that will be important for you to know.

Try informational Interviewing. By talking with individuals in the work force, you can gain a better idea of how your skills and experience fit into specific industries and career fields, find out first-hand what type of work environment different jobs offer, target your future job searches, market your skills more effectively to employers, and build your confidence in approaching others.

Guidelines for Informational Interviewing

- 1. You must still be looking for information. The purpose of informational interviewing is to help you decide what you want to do and where you want to do it. It is not a way to get a job interview.**
- 2. Talk to the everyday people who are doing the type of work that you might like to do. At some point you may be referred to “the person in charge,” but do not start at that level.**
- 3. Be sure you have located what is available in print about a particular career field, company, organization, or business before you begin interviewing others for information. Libraries, public relation officers, personnel directors, Chambers of Commerce, the Internet, and occupational organizations and associations are sources that provide information.**
- 4. Always ask for an appointment ahead of time. State specifically that you are interested in learning more about a particular job, career field, industry, or business. Ask for 20 or 30 minutes of the person’s time, and be sure to keep the meeting within that time frame.**
- 5. If the person you speak with recommends someone else as a source of further information, always ask if you may refer to him or her when contacting the recommended individual.**
- 6. Write down the information you received, the name of the person with whom you spoke, and date of your conversation for your records. Later, you can compare information received from different sources.**
- 7. Send a thank-you note after the informational interview.**

Possible Informational Interview Questions

The questions you ask during an informational interview will depend upon what type of information is most important to you. Look back over your values while developing your questions. The following are possible questions to ask.

- Describe a typical day.**
- What do you like least about your job?**
- What do you like most about your job?**
- What types of changes are occurring in your field?**
- How did you get into this type of work?**
- What is your background?**
- What type of training/education is needed for this job?**
- What type of advancement opportunities does this company offer?**
- How do salaries in this field compare with other fields?**
- What suggestions do you have for anyone interested in obtaining this type of position?**
- Who do you suggest I talk to for further information?**

GAIN EXPERIENCE

One of the best ways to explore majors and careers is to try them out. There are a variety of different ways to gain experience in a particular field, some of which are listed below.

Academic and Course Activities

Study abroad—Study in a foreign country. This is generally unpaid but credit-bearing. Visit the International Student Center at <http://www2.astate.edu/a/international/study-abroad/>.

Employment Activities

Part-time jobs and work-study jobs—Both are paid, non-credit-bearing employment opportunities available to undergraduate students. They can be related to a student's career path, in which case they will be a much more beneficial experience as well as a source of income. Visit the ASU Career Center's web site at <http://career.astate.edu>.

Internships and Cooperative Education—An internship is hands-on experience in your major or field working over a summer or semester in a professional position. Cooperative education experiences (coops) are a unique plan of education that combines in-class experiences with supervised and planned work experiences. Class and work experiences can be at the same time or can alternate. Internships and co-ops can be paid or unpaid, credit-bearing or not.

Volunteer Activities

Clubs and organizations—At ASU, there are many opportunities to get involved in clubs and organizations. These are unpaid, non-credit-bearing activities that can be very career related. Go to <http://union.astate.edu/StudentInvolvement/OrgBreakDown.php> for more information.

Volunteering and community service—There are many chances to volunteer in a community like Jonesboro. These are unpaid, generally non-credit-bearing activities.

My Decision Log

We realize that there are far more activities in this handout than you can probably do or keep track of in a single semester. Therefore, we recommend that you keep track of what you do and what you want to do in your search for career or major decidedness. Use this as a starting point and refer back. You may want to use pencil or make copies to make changes as you progress to-ward your decision!

LEARN ABOUT YOURSELF

Your last action: _____
 Date: _____ Who you met with: _____
 Outcome: _____

Your last action: _____
 Date: _____ Who you met with: _____
 Outcome: _____

What will be your next action? Indicate what you anticipate doing in the next semester.

Action: _____
 Action: _____

INVESTIGATE ASU ACADEMIC DEGREE PROGRAMS

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RESEARCH OCCUPATIONAL INFORMATION

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