

# Choosing a Major

## A Guide for Parents

Year  
**01**

### First-Year

During their first year or so of college, students will be involved (formally or informally) in assessing their skills, interests, and abilities.

Year  
**02**

### Second-Year

Generally, during the second year of college, a student begins to explore majors and career options more seriously.

Year  
**03**

### Mid-Career

During the sophomore year and throughout the junior year, it is important for students to experiment with possible career options.

Year  
**04**

### Graduation

The senior year is when organizing and conducting a job search or graduate school search begins in earnest.

# A Career Planning Course for Parents

Your son or daughter just left for (or returned to) college but doesn't seem to have a clue as to what he or she wants to major in, let alone choose as a career. Don't worry, this is not unusual, although you might wish your student had a little more sense of direction.

Choosing a career is a process students need to go through, and they go through the stages of this process at different rates of speed. **The steps include:**

1. Assessing skills, interests, and abilities (an important first step to choosing an appropriate career)
2. Exploring majors and career options
3. Experimenting with possible career options
4. Organizing and conducting a job or graduate school search.

You can assist and support in each of these stages. But what can (or should) you do?



# Careers 101

During their first year or so of college, students will be involved (formally or informally) in assessing their skills, interests, and abilities. They will do this through finding success (or failure) in courses they take, involvement in campus activities, discussions with their friends and faculty, and by being exposed to and trying out different ideas and experiences.

Most students enter college with a very limited knowledge of the vast array of courses and majors available to them. When they begin to delve into studies that are new to them, even those who entered with a plan may be drawn to different options. This is an exciting time for students.

## **What you can do to help?**

- Support their exploration of new areas of study and interests. This, after all, is what education is all about.
- Affirm what you know to be areas of skill and ability they have consistently demonstrated. Sometimes students overlook these and need to be reminded.
- Talk with your student about the courses and activities they are enjoying. Students discover new things about themselves throughout the college experience. Your willingness to listen and be a sounding board will keep you in the loop.
- Don't panic if your child is excited about majoring in something like English, history, or art. These can be excellent choices, particularly if they are a good match for a student's interests and skills.
- Support your student's responsible involvement in campus activities but urge this to be balanced with maintaining achievement in the classroom.
- Urge them to seek assistance in the campus career center. Most institutions have assessment instruments and coaches to help students to define their skills, interests, and abilities.

# Careers 201

Generally, during the second year of college, a student begins to explore majors and career options more seriously. Many colleges and universities require that new students take a broad range of subjects to promote this exploration.

## What you can do to help?

- Don't insist upon a decision about a major or possible career choice immediately. If you sense that your student's indecision is a barrier to positive progress, urge that they seek assistance in the [career center](#). Students often have difficulty making a "final" choice because they fear they may close off options and make a wrong choice.
- Suggest that your student talk with faculty and [career coaches](#) about potential choices.
- Direct them to family, friends, or colleagues who are in fields in which they have an interest. "Informational interviewing" with people can be extremely helpful at this stage.
- Steer your student toward a source of information. Many campuses have career coaches or mentoring network of alumni in various career fields who are willing to share information with students about their careers. These resources are invaluable both in this exploratory stage and later as students are seeking internships and jobs.



# Careers 301

During the sophomore year and throughout the junior year, it is important for students to experiment with possible career options. They can do this in a variety of ways: internships, cooperative education programs, summer jobs, campus jobs, and responsible volunteer experiences both on campus and in the local community. This is a critical time for your support and understanding.

## What you can do to help

- Encourage your student to use the [resources available](#) at the campus career center. Experts there can assist them in preparing a good resume and finding opportunities to test career choices. Most career centers are in direct contact with employers.
- Tell your student that you understand the importance of gaining exposure to and experience in their field of career interest. Broadening experience through involvement outside the classroom is a valuable use of time.
- Internships or summer experiences may be non-paying. Also, a good opportunity may be in a distant location. Discuss your financial expectations before a commitment is made.
- Don't conduct the [internship](#) or summer job search for your student. It's a great help to provide networking contacts or names of people who may be useful; however, making the contact and speaking for them deprives them of an important learning experience—and may make a poor impression on the future employer.



# Careers 401

The senior year is when organizing and conducting a job search or graduate school search begins in earnest. It is also a time when students are heavily involved in more advanced courses and often have more responsible roles in campus and/or volunteer activities. Balancing these important pursuits and setting priorities is a constant challenge for seniors. You are probably anxious for this young adult to make a decision—and yet, they may be moving toward closure more slowly than you would wish.

## What you can do to help?

- Suggest that they use the campus career center throughout the senior year. These offices provide assistance in preparation for the job search. Offerings may include:
  - Workshops and individual help with resume and cover letter writing, interviewing, and other job-search skills,
  - Individual and group career coaching,
  - Job-search resources,
  - On-campus interviewing opportunities, and,
  - Alumni career network or mentor programs.
- Don't nag your student about not having a job yet. This will often have the reverse effect. Use positive reinforcement.
- Offer to assist by sending information you may have found about your student's target career field and/or job postings that may be of interest. Listen for indications from them that you are getting carried away—and back off.
- Don't call potential employers to intervene for your student. Contact with potential employers is the candidate's responsibility.
- Be prepared to support them through the ups and downs of the job and graduate school search. It can be a bumpy road—not every desired job or graduate school acceptance will come through. Your student will need reassurance that for every door that closes, another opens.

# Extra Ways to Help

One of the most valuable things that parents can do to help a student with career planning is to listen, be open to ideas, help your student locate information, and be nonjudgmental. Here are ways you can help:

- Acknowledge that uncertainty about majors and careers is normal. Many students feel isolated in their indecision about choosing a major, but they are far from alone. In fact, over half of all students change their major before graduation.
- Promote self-exploration. Even if your student has chosen a major, encourage them to engage in self exploration to confirm their decision. Career choices begin by understanding one's interests, values, personality, and skills. Support your child's exploration of new subjects and interests—this is a vital part of their educational journey!
- Challenge misconceptions about career planning. Many students feel pressured to find the “perfect” career, believing that once they do, they will be certain. In reality, there are numerous majors and careers that can be fulfilling, each reflecting different strengths and passions. Career choices rarely come with 100% certainty, and the nature of today’s workforce means students are unlikely to stick with just one career for life.
- Share your own career development story. Talk to your student about why you chose your career path and share what your work entails. Be open about both the positive and negative aspects of your job.
- Value a liberal education. Employers appreciate a liberal arts education because it provides broad knowledge, transferable skills, and ethical grounding; qualities that apply across fields. Since your child is likely to change careers throughout their life, the focus at the undergraduate level is on developing versatile skills that will help them adapt in a dynamic, ever-changing world.
- Encourage exploration of occupational resources. Resources like the **Occupational Outlook Handbook** ([www.bls.gov/ooh/](http://www.bls.gov/ooh/)) and **Steppingblocks** (<https://wku.steppingblocks.com/app/dashboard>) can help students learn about different career fields. Encourage your student to review their university's catalog and match potential majors with their interests, skills, and motivations.

# Extra Ways to Help

- Emphasize the importance of experience. The Career Development Center does not guarantee job placements after graduation. In today's competitive job market, gaining relevant experience is crucial. Encourage internships, part-time jobs, or volunteer work related to their field, as well as co-curricular activities like student organizations, research, and study abroad programs.
- Encourage your student to develop their resume. Writing a resume is a practical exercise that helps students assess their strengths and areas for improvement. The Career Development Center offers resume samples and critiques, and students should take advantage of these services.
- Teach the value of networking. Help your student connect with professionals in their fields of interest. Encourage them to conduct informational interviews or job shadow to gain firsthand knowledge of different careers. The Career Development Center can support students in building their networking skills.

- Let your student make their own decisions. While it's okay to offer guidance on majors or career paths, the final decision should be up to your student. Career choices can be stressful, so be patient, understanding, and supportive, even if their decision differs from your own.
- Encourage regular use of the Academic and Career Planning Center. Career decision-making is an ongoing process, not a one-time event. Encourage your student to utilize the center's services throughout their college years, starting in their first semester. The job market is highly competitive, and the Center's staff can guide students on the types of experiences they should pursue to become strong candidates in their chosen field. We are located in the Downing Student Union (DSU), on the second floor, suite 2001. We are also available by phone, **(270) 745-3095**, and email, **careerhelp@wku.edu**.
- The center can help them in many ways including, but not limited to:
  - Internship/Job Search Process
  - Resume/Cover Letter Development
  - Career and Internship Fairs
  - Establishing Career Goals
  - Mock Interviews
  - Graduate/Professional School Application Process
  - Individual Career Coaching
- Support the Academic and Career Planning Center. If your company has job openings or internships, consider listing them with the center. You can also help by volunteering to mentor students and offering career advice based on your real-world experience.

# Final Thoughts

The college years are a time of exploration, experimentation, and learning on many levels for students and their parents! Some student challenges may seem more positive than others, but all contribute to the educational outcomes of the college or university experience. Throughout these years, students are developing a “record of achievement” that will be evaluated by employers and graduate schools as they move beyond college. There are several pieces of this record:

- Academic achievement. The grade point average (GPA) is one factor considered by competitive employers and graduate schools. It is one of the few tangible indications of a student’s ability to learn and perform effectively, at least in the academic environment. Therefore, students need to do as well as possible in the classroom, especially in courses in their majors.
- Responsible work experience. In today’s competitive employment market, many employers seek students who have related internship, summer, cooperative education, or part-time job or volunteer experiences. In fact, employers often look to their own such programs as primary sources for their new hires. These experiences are particularly critical for liberal arts students whose majors may not appear to be directly related to their areas of career interest.
- Responsible involvement outside the classroom. Extracurricular activities provide the opportunity for students to gain many valuable and career-related skills, such as the ability to work effectively with others in a team environment; leadership; planning and organizational skills; and priority-setting and time management. These are part of the package of skills employers seek in their new hires. Best of luck to you in navigating the challenging waters of parenting a college or university student.

