Choosing/Changing a Major: Identifying Interests and Skills

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Self-assessment involves identifying and understanding your interests, skills, values and personality as a foundation for career decision making, planning and action. Assessing and understanding your interests and skills is the first step in identifying a career path that is right for you. There's a big difference between getting a job and pursuing a career you love. Research has shown that individuals who choose majors and careers that are closely aligned with their interests, skills, values and personality tend to be more satisfied in their careers and enjoy greater career success. The self-assessment process is important, not only in deciding on your major or pursuing your first internship or job after college, but throughout your life as you move forward in your career.

Listed below is a series of exercises and web sites to assist you in identifying your interests, skills and values. Each of these resources will help provide insight into what would be a good career match for you.

Interests

Interest is a key motivating factor for work. If we are interested in our work, we will find it more enjoyable, be more motivated to learn about it, develop relevant skills, work hard, and persist through difficult challenges. These factors increase our chances of success and job satisfaction.

What are your interests? Think broadly when you answer this question — include work, academic, volunteer, and leisure interests. Consider subject areas (e.g., biology, accounting, logistics, etc.) as well as activities (e.g., research, event planning, public speaking, etc.) Below is a list of questions that may help you identify some of your interests.

- What are your favorite sections of the library or bookstore?
- When reading newspapers, magazines, surfing the Internet, or watching television, which issues/topics are you naturally drawn to?
- What activities or hobbies do you like to do in your spare time?
- What are the most interesting jobs you can think of?
- If money were no object, how would you make a living? How would you spend your time?
- What kinds of things are you doing when you lose track of time?
- If you won the lottery, to which causes/issues would you give the money?
- If you were a reporter, what kinds of stories would you write?
- What kinds of information do you find most fascinating?
- What do you love to do?
- Of all of the people you know, who do you think has the most interesting job?
- Who are your heroes?
- What would you do if there was nothing to hold you back?
- What did you dream of being when you were 10?
- Which courses (college or high-school) have you enjoyed the most?
- What subject areas/topics are you most passionate about?
- Which aspects of your jobs have you enjoyed?
- How do you like to spend your time outside of work or school?
- What was your favorite school subject in high school?
- What do you like to do with friends?
- What have you done that you are most proud of?

Based on your answers to the questions above, list a few of your interest areas:
1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Listed below are some ways to further explore and define your interests:

- Become involved in student clubs and organizations on campus
- Volunteer on campus or in your community
- Consider conducting research with a professor, or completing an internship with an organization
- Discuss your career interests with friends, family, professors, advisors, co-workers, etc.
- Take the O*NET Interest Profiler in the Career Education Center

Skills

Skills are learned abilities—things we do well. The average person has 500 to 800 skills, yet most people can only identify a few. Often, students have far more skills than they realize, since they tend to take many of their skills for granted. Do you know what your skills are? Which skills do you like to use? Just because we can do something well doesn't mean that we enjoy doing it. Can you communicate your skills effectively? Discover what your skills are by looking at the experiences that have given you the most satisfaction and greatest feeling of accomplishment. These successes may have occurred through a variety of experiences. Do not restrict yourself to job or school-related accomplishments. Below are examples of skills that you may have but don't recognize.

Knowledge-based skills are acquired through jobs, education, hobbies, community activities, volunteer activities and life experiences. To think about your knowledge-based skills, ask yourself what subject areas do you know a lot about? These skills vary depending on the field or industry, but some examples are customer service, computer skills, and web design.

Self-management skills are often called "personality traits." These are the skills you use day by day to get along with others and survive. They are the skills that make you unique. Here are a few examples of personality traits: analytical, goal oriented, flexible, creative, reliable, organized, adaptable, efficient, enthusiastic, helpful, and ambitious.

Transferable skills are "portable skills" that you take with you to other experiences and jobs, and can be carried out in different knowledge areas and industries. Over the years you have developed many skills from coursework, extracurricular activities and your life experiences. Throughout high school and college you have been acquiring transferable skills in time management, interpersonal communication, and analytical thinking through campus and community activities, class projects and assignment, athletic activities, internships and summer/part-time employment. Future employers will expect you to be able to apply the skills you have learned in college to the work environment. Below are examples of transferable skills.

- Critical thinking skills
- Leadership & management skills
- Administration skills
- Communication skills

- Interpersonal skills
- Research & investigation skills
- Design & planning skills
- Information management skills

Skills Exercise

Start by writing down different experiences when different skills were emphasized. Focus on classes, projects, activities, volunteer experiences, internships, part-time and summer jobs that demonstrate your skills. Below are some questions to encourage you to think about the skills you have developed through your academic, work, volunteer, community, and personal experiences.

- At what activities do you excel?
- What are your strengths and weaknesses?
- What skills do you want to use in a job?

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- In which academic areas have you excelled in the past? In what areas do you need to develop?
- For which talents have you received recognition?
- How would your friends/family/professors describe you?
- What is the most important thing you learned so far in college?

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Skill Identifier	In what class(es) was this skill or quality emphasized?	Through which projects did you develop this skill/quality?	In which experiences, did you develop this skill/quality?
Leadership			
Problem Solving Skills			
Written Communication Skills			
Teamwork			
Analytical/Quantitative Skills			
Strong Work Ethic			
Verbal Communication Skills			
Initiative			
Computer Skills			
Technical Skills			
Detail Oriented			
Flexibility/Adaptability			
Interpersonal Skills			
Organizational Ability			
Friendly/Outgoing Personality			
Strategic Planning Skills			
Creativity			
Entrepreneurial Skills			

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Skill Identifier	In what class(es) was this skill or quality emphasized?	Through which projects did you develop this skill/quality?	In which experiences, did you develop this skill/quality?
Tactfulness			

Skills Checklist

The skills checklist is a quick and easy way to assess your strongest skills. Check the skills that you have used before from the list below. Consider your achievements in a range of activities (school, work, sports, volunteering, family life, community or religious activities.) Identify those instances where you used a skill in a situation or task that you completed. The list of skills below can be found in a cross-section of careers.

Numerical/Analytical	Communication
— Auditing — Record Keeping/Bookkeeping — Measuring — Calculating — Budgeting — Working with mathematical/economic models — Working with numerical data requiring precision — Analyzing quantitative information — Writing computer programs	— Writing — Editing — Interviewing — Speaking (one-on-one & groups) — Persuading — Interpreting/translating — Selling — Listening — Teaching — Reading
Investigative/Research	**Administrative/Managerial**
— Inspecting — Appraising/evaluating — Classifying — Research – online, observations, etc. — Investigating — Reviewing	— Administering a project or task — Resource allocation — Managing or supervising others — Time management — Collaboration/organizing people — Delegating tasks to others
Interpersonal Skills	**Design/Planning**
— Negotiating — Coaching — Mentoring — Facilitating — Conflict resolution — Teaching — Advising	— Designing displays — Initiating new ideas, ways of doing things — Creating materials for print/electronic media — Conceptualizing parts of a system into whole — Predicting/forecasting trends, outcomes — Planning/coordinating an event or task — Managing logistics for an event

Once you have checked all the skills you have used, go back and select the skills you enjoy using the most. List them below:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

List any skills that you have used in the past that aren't included on the lists:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Write Your Own Story Exercise

It's 2060! You have decided to retire after a very successful career. A major publication (*Business Week, The Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, People, Sports Illustrated, Fast Company, Inc.,* etc.) wants to write a feature article about you that describes your career and life path and how you got to where you are today. If appropriate, include the interests and skills that you have identified in previous exercises in your story. The story would describe how you achieved your success—as you define it.

In which publication will the article be published, what will the headline be, and what will that article say?

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Based on the activities you've completed so far, create a list of areas that sound interesting and that you would like to explore further:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Additional Resources

- **Career Education Center (CEC)** (www.up.edu/career): The CEC maintains a career resource library with numerous books and publications related to a variety of occupations, including *How to Choose a College Major, What Can I Do With This Major,* and *Great Jobs for Liberal Arts Majors.* The Career Center's website contains numerous career planning and job search resources, including links to job search sites, which can inform you about the types of opportunities available in various fields.

- **What Can I Do With This Major**: (https://www.up.edu/career/majors-and-careers/major-and-career-options.html & http://whatcanidowiththismajor.com/major/). These resources will help you connect majors with careers. Keep in mind that the information sheets and websites are representative of typical career paths associated with each major and not a comprehensive list. You may want to explore information and websites from multiple majors to learn about a wide range of career opportunities.

- **Occupational Outlook Handbook** (www.bls.gov/oco), **O*NET Online** (http://online.onetcenter.org), & **My Next Move** (www.mynextmove.org): These online resources from the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics are some of the most comprehensive sources of current career information. You can search for specific careers or browse career categories. For each career, you will find information such as education requirements, working conditions, outlook, earning potential, tasks, skills, salary information, and more for over 900 different careers.

- **LinkedIn** (www.linkedin.com): You can use LinkedIn to research your career interests, see what career paths exist for various majors, and become connected with alumni and professionals in industries and organizations with which you'd like to work. It is helpful for all students to build a strong LinkedIn profile, and use Groups and Company Pages for career research and professional networking. Explore UP alumni career paths using the "University of Portland Alumni – Official Group" on LinkedIn: http://www.linkedin.com/groups?gid=135740 and the LinkedIn University pages

- **Informational Interviews:** The best way to learn about a career is to talk to someone who knows what it is like. Connect with alumni and other professionals who work in career fields that are of interest and conduct informational interviews. For more information on informational interviewing, review the Informational Interviewing Handout and contact the CEC.

- **Career Fairs:** The CEC supports three career fairs on campus. Attend on campus career fairs to learn about career options and connect with potential employers.

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- **Professional organizations in your field(s) of interest.** Many professional organizations offer information and memberships designed for students. The CEC maintains a list of relevant professional and networking associations in the Portland area, and you can find additional organizations in the Occupational Outlook Handbook.

Steps to Take

After you have narrowed your choices to two or three majors, the following suggestions can help you make your final decision.

- **Take courses in different areas of interest.** Many students find that taking a few courses before choosing a major helps them to make a better decision.
- **Complete an internship.** You will learn more about potential career opportunities through an internship and applied experience. You will also have the benefit of both faculty and professional mentor(s) to help you gain firsthand experience and skills. An internship provides another perspective that can help you make a decision.
- **Select a minor to balance your interests.** If you are interested in two different disciplines, you may be able to study both. You are not required to pursue an academic minor, but many students do because it allows them to develop in-depth knowledge of another area. Some students choose a minor that is closely related to their major, while others choose a minor that allows them to explore personal interests.
- **Discuss your alternatives with your advisor/professor/upperclassmen/family/friends.** Your advisors, professors and upperclassmen are excellent resources for information about majors and minors. Your advisor can point out the advantages of each program you are considering. Your family members and friends can help you to see how your skills may fit with certain majors/careers.

Please Remember

- You can add a second major or a minor to fulfill your various academic interests.
- Your major does not necessarily determine your career for the rest of your life. Except for careers that require specialized training, such as nursing, education, and engineering, most majors will prepare you for a number of career options.
- It is important to gain hands-on experience no matter what major you choose. Part-time jobs, internships, volunteer opportunities, and extracurricular activities will help you gain experience while you are still in school.
- Changing your major is okay. Most college students change their major at least once.
- If you find yourself struggling to make a final decision, schedule an appointment with the CEC. A career counselor can help you process and sort through the information you have gathered.

Please note that these exercises identify your interests and skills in a very brief and general way. It is best to examine these areas early in the job search process. The Career Education Center is available to help you take the information gained from these activities and integrate it into your job search strategy. To explore and discuss further, schedule an appointment with a staff member in the CEC by contacting us via phone or email, stopping by our office in Franz 110, or looking at available appointments online through Handshake.