GUIDE TO
EXPLORING MAJORS AND CAREERS

FIRST STEPS

✓ Be proactive – it’s your life. Deciding on a major or career is a process and it takes time; it is never too early to begin exploring.
✓ Determine your strengths, interests, values, abilities, and skills.
✓ Do not be overwhelmed. You do not have to choose your lifelong plan right now.

INTRODUCTION

Key Points before You Start

• The skills and experiences you gained while in college are generally more important to an employer than the specific degree you earned.
• The average college student changes his/her major an average of 3-5 times.
• Most people pursue careers in fields that are unrelated to their college majors.
• College helps you begin your professional working career, but it does not label you for life.

Determine a career or a major?

• People who desire to prepare for a specific career may choose a major to support their choice
• People who are focused on choosing a major may have interest in a variety of careers

While looking for a career or major, it is important to remember that we all have a different way of arriving at decisions. We each need to find our OWN style. In addition, keep in mind that no test or person can tell you what you should do. The decision is YOURS to make.

CAREER DECISION MAKING

Many factors can influence a person’s decision-making. 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.

Types of Decision Making

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. Read the list below. Which of the following 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 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?

**MAJOR CHOOSING AND CAREER PLANNING**

**Defining Terms**

It is important to distinguish between similar terms. Often, we use these terms interchangeably, but in reality, they are quite different from one another.

**Occupation.** An occupation is 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 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 (BA or BS) or professional (BSEE, BSBA, BSW) in focus. Liberal arts degrees are typically broader, preparing you for a wide array of careers. Professional degrees are narrower in focus, as they are preparing you to enter a specific career upon graduation. All degrees have some components 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 major is a primary area of study within a degree (BA in English or BS in Biology).

**Dual Degree.** Two separate degrees, usually from different academic divisions or colleges (BA in English and BJ in Broadcast).

**Double Major.** Two majors with the same degree within the same division (BA in English and BA 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 (BA 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**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Choose a Major</th>
<th>Plan a Career</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Choose an academic program of study for the next one to four years</td>
<td>• Planning a career is an ongoing process for the rest of your life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• At MU, students are required to choose a major by the end of their sophomore year (or after having reached 60 credit hours)</td>
<td>• You may experience first-hand what a career and its working environment is like by gaining targeted experience through part-time jobs, volunteering, or internships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• You may not be <em>decided</em> although you may have <em>declared</em> a major; switch majors is common among college students; when selecting a major, think about what interests and excites you, and what would give you the employment options you would like to have after graduation</td>
<td>• You can increase your chances of choosing a career that is the best fit for you by “testing the waters” before graduation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• There are many different potential combinations of majors, minors, and degrees; <em>meet regularly with your advisor</em> to decide what options/combination is best for you</td>
<td>• If you are interested in pursuing a profession that requires specific preparation or additional graduate education, choosing a major will likely be closely linked to choosing a career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <em>All majors</em> provide the opportunity to learn the transferable skills that employers are looking for, such as analysis, communication, teamwork, and time management (see the MU Career Center Guide to Transferable Skills)</td>
<td>• If you are pursuing a liberal art education, choosing a major is a small part of planning your career because there are many career options available to you</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Suggested further readings**: 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](http://career.missouri.edu).

**CAREER EXPLORATION ACTIVITIES**

When you are having difficulty moving forward with your decisions towards a major or career, try spending some time and effort on the following activities.

**Learn About Yourself**

When you are looking for a career path or major, you should have a good idea of what your interests, strengths, abilities, skills, and values are. Below are some activities that will help you learn more about yourself.

**Talk with someone.** Family, friends, faculty members, academic advisors, and professionals in fields you are drawn to can be great resources. In addition, talking with a Career Specialist or a Career Counselor at the MU Career Center can also help you further explore more about yourself.

**Take a self-assessment.** You can take the Self-Directed Search, Discover, or the Missouri Occupational/Majors Card Sort with a Career Specialist at the MU Career Center by simply dropping by any time we are open. Career Interest Game at [http://career.missouri.edu](http://career.missouri.edu) is another option you could use.

**Take a Career Explorations (SSC 2100) course.** If you are nearing the beginning of the Fall or Spring 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 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, and 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. Occupational dreams can be one of the best predictors of your future career. 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? 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).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>What you liked about it</th>
<th>Why you are or are not pursuing this occupation</th>
<th>Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If any of your occupational dreams seem “doable,” consider learning more about them through research or job shadowing to see if your image of the career matches the reality. If they are 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?

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

- 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 interest and excites you. Try to think about the kinds of things you enjoy doing and talking about on a day-to-day basis.

For more information, check out our *Guide Holland Code*.

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 can easily be expanded by introducing yourself to new subjects, activities, and people. Luckily, college is an ideal environment for doing all three.

**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 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 (see the *MU Career Center Guide to Transferable Skills*). 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.

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?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Values</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Advancement</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moving up, making more money, having increased responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Benefits</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health, medical, dental, retirement, vacation, paid sick leave, maternity leave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Challenge</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using your creativity, training, intelligence and other talents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Choice of Environment</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having the choice of indoor/outdoor, smoke free, organized, geographic mobility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Compatible Co-Workers</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having good friends at work, working with people who have similar interests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Competition</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Striving for success, doing your best, competing with others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Contribution to Society</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being a useful member of the groups with which you identify, knowing you have accomplished things that will benefit others, making a lasting contribution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Creativity</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressing yourself, achieving fulfillment from creating something yourself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Diversity</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having different tasks, using a variety of skills, working with a diverse group of people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Easy Commute</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Driving a short distance to work and not having to deal with much traffic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Excitement</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having fun at work, enjoying what you do, having a stimulating environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family Life</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having time to devote to personal relationships, having time with your family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Flexible Hours</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being able to work at your convenience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>High Earnings</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significantly improving your financial position, obtaining those things money can buy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Independence</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having freedom to “do your own thing,” either on or off the job, having time flexibility, controlling your own actions, having autonomy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Moral Fulfillment</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintaining your moral, ethical, and/or religious standards without conflict, being able to accept the goals, values, and standards of your organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Leisure Time</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoying the company of others, making new friends, having time for hobbies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Leadership</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being in charge, having responsibility, leading others in a group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>On the Job Training</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receiving training while at work to improve your skills, going to conferences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Power and Influence</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having the ability to influence or control others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prestige and Status</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting approval or attention from those whose opinions you respect, achieving status in line with your talents and achievements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rewards</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having job satisfaction, receiving verbal praise, trips, new cars, raises, certificates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Security</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling safe, free of continual concern about dangers or unexpected and/or unpleasant changes, having the essentials you need, steady income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Travel</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Going places, seeing the world, enjoying cultural experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Variety</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having many different job tasks, facing challenges rather than routines</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Investigate MU Academic Degree Programs

Be sure to do some research on what majors and minors MU 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 MU has to offer. A complete listing of every major offered at MU is available at http://majors.missouri.edu and http://registrar.missouri.edu/Catalog/index.htm. Try reading through each major and making a note of 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?

Visit with Academic Exploration and Advising Services 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://aeas.missouri.edu for more information.

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 to http://www.missouri.edu/academics.htm or http://majors.missouri.edu for more information.

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 see if 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 familiar with a few occupations. Take the time to research occupations you are interested in fully; it can be devastating to find out, after pursuing one occupation throughout college, that it wasn’t what you thought it was.

Read print resources. Many great print resources available can tell you about the typical work environment, work tasks, salary, job outlook, training needed, and much more. The Career Information Library in the MU Career Center is a great place to start, as well as Ellis Library, the public library, and local bookstores. You can also look at the Holland Occupational Files at the MU Career Center.

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

- O*Net, http://online.onetcenter.org
The MU Career Center web site, [http://career.missouri.edu](http://career.missouri.edu)

**Talk to human resources.** A variety of people can help you find information about occupations. In addition to the staff at the MU Career Center, look for assistance from academic advisors, faculty members, librarians, and professionals in the field.

**Try job shadowing.** Many times, you can follow a professional around work for a few hours or days by simply asking. If you 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. 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 can provide this 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 period.
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?
- Whom 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 varieties of different ways to gain experience in a particular field, some of which are listed below.

**Academic and Course Activities**

**Exploratory courses.** Taking courses in a field to test it out. This unpaid, credit-bearing experience generally lasts one semester. Talk with your academic advisor.

**Service learning.** Service learning connects students with the community in partnerships that provide effective and far-reaching assistance to those in need, as well as create valuable learning environments. In service learning opportunities, there is a strategic effort to discuss and learn from these experiences, particularly through course-related projects. This unpaid, credit-bearing experience can start as a part of a course but can extend long after the course ends if desired. Visit the Office of Service Learning at [http://servicelearning.missouri.edu/](http://servicelearning.missouri.edu/) for more information.

**Undergraduate research.** Many opportunities exist for undergraduates to do research, both paid and unpaid, credit bearing and not. Visit the Office of Undergraduate Research at [http://undergradresearch.missouri.edu](http://undergradresearch.missouri.edu) for more information.

**Study abroad.** Study in a foreign country. This is generally unpaid but credit bearing. Visit the International Center at [http://international.missouri.edu/studyabroad](http://international.missouri.edu/studyabroad).

**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 MU Career Center's web site at [http://career.missouri.edu](http://career.missouri.edu) for more information.

**Internships and cooperative education.** An internship is a 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 MU, there are many opportunities to get involved in clubs and organizations. Go to [http://students.missouri.edu](http://students.missouri.edu) for more information.

**Volunteering and community service.** There are many chances to volunteer in a community like Columbia. Check out [http://students.missouri.edu](http://students.missouri.edu) or [http://www.vacmo.org](http://www.vacmo.org).
There are far more activities in this handout than you can probably do in a single semester. We recommend that you keep track of what you do and what you want to do in your search for a career or major. Use this as a starting point and refer back.

LEARN ABOUT YOURSELF
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: __________________________________________________

INVESTIGATE MU ACADEMIC DEGREE PROGRAMS
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: __________________________________________________

RESEARCH OCCUPATIONAL INFORMATION
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: __________________________________________________

GAIN EXPERIENCE
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: __________________________________________________

NEXT STEP
✓ Come to the MU Career Center to talk with someone about your career planning and to take a self-assessment.
✓ Visit our Handouts link on http://career.missouri.edu/resources to download other handouts in our Career and Major Exploration series.