

# Parents' Guide

## IN SEARCH OF A COLLEGE MAJOR AND CAREER DIRECTION



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## About Your Role

**Research indicates that parents are the number one influence in the career choices made by their students.** Yes, you influence your student's career decisions in many ways—in ways that are subtle and beyond your level of awareness and in ways that are not so subtle. Given the important role that you play in this exploration and decision-making process, I developed this Parents' Guide to support **you** in supporting your child as he or she goes through my DVD program. Now you might be a guardian, relative, or adult mentor rather than a parent in the traditional sense, but, for ease of writing purposes, I will use the term *parent* when referring to readers of this guide. The program participant may be a teenager or young adult who is not currently in school but is preparing for or considering going to college. Again, to facilitate writing efforts, I will use the term *student* when referencing program participants.



Before your student goes through the program, I invite you to scan the student User Guide and watch the DVD so you have a sense of the program. By doing so, you'll be able to reinforce the advice offered and support your student as needed. This program consists of six mini menu segments with segments 2–6 featuring guided activities to be completed by your student. One segment builds on the next and the program is self-paced so your student can take the time needed to complete a segment before moving on to the next one.

Like anything else in life, your student will get out of this program what he or she puts into it. Bottom line: It's important to consider your student's personality, maturity, level of motivation, and any special circumstances that could affect the process.

Next I'll give you an overview of the program, including my reasoning behind each DVD segment, and some ways in which you can support your child through the program and beyond. The segments are as follows:

### **IN SEARCH OF A COLLEGE MAJOR AND CAREER DIRECTION**

- 1. Introduction**
- 2. You've Got the Power**
- 3. Major Decisions**
- 4. The College Major and Career Connection**
- 5. Major Myths and Tips**
- 6. Rate the College Career Center**



## 1 – INTRODUCTION

My expectation is that you purchased this DVD program because your student is experiencing some degree of uncertainty about choice of a college major and/or career direction. My goal in the introduction is to help your student understand that it is **very** normal for students to be uncertain about these choices. I'm also, through the gypsy skit, stressing that there is no such thing as a career test that will give students the magic answer. My intention is to empower student viewers with the recognition that they can trust their own judgment as they make their way through this exploration process. The introduction ends with an overview of the results that students can anticipate as they complete the program:

### **AS A RESULT OF GOING THROUGH THIS PROGRAM...**

**... you will be able to identify your interests, questions, and needs related to choice of a college major and career direction.**

**... you will learn about the college major and career decision-making process.**

**...you will get information and tools to support you in taking action toward a direction of your own choosing.**

### **How you can support your student**

*You can reinforce the fact that uncertainty is normal and that being open to possibilities at this time has many benefits. Your student is venturing into new and unfamiliar areas and this form of risk-taking can be both exciting and anxiety-provoking. Be sensitive to your student's tendencies to perhaps both want and not want your support. At this point in their lives, teenagers are developing a self-concept to define themselves as individuals separate from parents and other family members. During this developmental transition, teens may experience genuine parental concern as pressure. Take care to not overreact if your child accuses you of meddling. Another way to look at this time is that your child may be struggling with his or her own push/pull between wanting to be taken care of and wanting to make his or her own way in the world. You can play a key role in helping your student gain confidence as he or she moves forward.*

## 2 – YOU'VE GOT THE POWER

College-bound teens are bombarded with advice related to their decision about what college or university to attend. This is also true for their college major and career decision-making efforts. Because most students have not, up to this point in their lives, had to make significant decisions like these, it can be easier to defer to the well-meaning opinions of others and lose sight of the valuable role that personal experiences and self-observations can offer. My aim, with the Power Boost exercises in this segment, is to give viewers tools for identifying topics and activities that interest and motivate them. This is a way of beginning to look at favorite interests, values, and enjoyable skills without conducting what we career professionals refer to as formal career assessments. We do not tend to be in the habit of consciously paying attention to what we enjoy most in our lives. We also tend to downplay those activities and skills that come most naturally to us yet, in many instances, these are strengths that others do not possess and that could play a key role in future employment.



### **How you can support your student**

*Let your student write the answers to the Power Boost activities, as well as the others that follow, without initially offering any input or support. Some students will have no difficulty coming up with detailed answers to the Power Boost questions and will enjoy maintaining a Power Boost Log, while others may struggle. If your student struggles to answer the Power Boost questions, check in to find out where he or she is getting stuck. You can try asking your student if there is anyone in particular that he or she would like to go to for help with the Power Boost activities, such as friends, relatives (including yourself), and other adult mentors. When they reach the point in this segment where they're directed to brainstorm career possibilities related to their Power Boost results, you might be enlisted to help come up with new career ideas. Again, you can also refer them to others for additional brainstorming input. With the Power Boost activities, and all the activities in this program, it's best to let them know you're available for support should they need it instead of jumping in and directing their activities. This is one way of helping them build the confidence that I noted earlier.*

## 3 – MAJOR DECISIONS

While the skit in this segment, featuring the blindfolded student, appears farfetched, it's not uncommon for students to approach selecting a college major in a way that's not too far removed from the blindfolded dart-throwing approach. While there are truly countless ways to approach the



college major selection process, I developed three activities for this program to get students started.

**I. The first approach** for selecting a college major encourages students to give some thought to their personal reasons for attending college and what they're looking to get out of their college experience. The variety of answers that could come out of this exercise is wide, and the answers will influence the choices that your student makes about which college major to select, what college to attend, and which experiences to pursue.

**II. The second approach** to selecting a college major gets your student considering college major subjects that are of interest and the level of interest held for each major. This exercise will reveal the subjects that your student enjoys learning about most in priority order. In my own private practice, I use some standardized career assessments when working with teen and adult clients. When I administer these assessments, I have to be careful because clients can sometimes read too much into the results they get with these standardized assessments ("This test is telling me I should do this or that) and fail to take into account their own perceptions and likes or dislikes. A great way to get students to take their own preferences into account is to ask them point blank what interests them. This college major interest activity follows this approach, except that the student viewer is given a list of majors to work with rather than naming subjects of interest off the top of his or her head. In developing this list of majors, I also took into account temperament and personality differences and a popular model of career interests. In plain English, I put quite a bit of time into making sure that all personality types and interest categories would be represented in the list of majors offered. The list I developed includes some majors that are common and very popular as well as majors that are less mainstream.

**III. The third approach** is similar to the approach for selecting college majors of interest, although now the emphasis shifts to careers. I'm asking students to determine what career areas they like most (in priority order), taking into account, once again, personality differences and broad interest areas. I cover the connection between college majors and careers in the fourth segment, but for now, the focus of this activity is strictly to indicate and rank careers of interest. On a special note, for both the college major and career interest activities, I direct students to feel free to add their own ideas to the lists. This includes career ideas generated from the Power Boost brainstorming activity.

### **How you can support your student**

*If your student is open to it, a discussion about the wide range of reasons why students (not just your student) attend college could prove eye-opening and thought-provoking. While it might not get your student past the more obvious pat answers, it could stir some seeds of debate and food for thought. Likewise, a*

*discussion about how students these days might define career success could also lead to a potentially lively discussion. You might get a shrug of the shoulders or a roll of the eyes when you bring up these subjects. Then again, you may get a memorable discussion going with your student. You are the best judge of the potential for engagement, although you surely wouldn't want to underestimate your student.*

*As for the college major and career interest activities, you can play a role in helping your student notice interest patterns that surface through these exercises (including the Power Boost activities) as well as in everyday life. Just as with the client example in the You've Got the Power segment (with my client Caitlin), it's possible that your student will be drawn to some key interest areas over and over again. The goal here is to give your student some ideas and direction for career and college major interests to explore. Instead of exploring just any old college major or career, students come up with possibilities that are in line with their favorite interests and most enjoyable activities. Through these assessments and career exploration activities (students can explore career areas of interest through reading, direct observation, talking with those employed in areas of interest, and hands-on experiences), your student is taking positive action towards work that is both satisfying and rewarding.*



#### **4 – The College Major and Career Connection**

The fourth segment focuses on the connection between college majors and career interests. While there are indeed occupations that have very strict college major requirements for career entry, most do not. There are often countless ways to gain knowledge, experience, and entry into career fields of interest. As described in the video, one approach that can be helpful when preparing for entry into a career area of interest is to consider the desired end when making choices about college coursework and experiential possibilities. The building the bridge concept described in the video is about beginning with the end in mind and taking steps to bridge the gap between where the student is now and where he or she would like to go. Your student can build multiple bridges, thereby exploring and reality-testing more than one interest over time, or focus on building one bridge. I am a big advocate of exploring more than one interest area in order to expand awareness, gain multiple experiences and skills, and develop employer contacts, but your student may prefer to focus on just one career interest.

You might think that internships will be required while your student is in college and that your student will automatically get support with job placement as graduation approaches. While internships or co-op experiences are required in some programs, there is a good chance that they won't be required of your student. The extent to which college and university personnel develop hands-on

experiences for students also varies. In many cases, students are expected to get their own internship or co-op positions. Employers contact college career centers to post vacancies and many colleges have on-campus or virtual employer recruitment programs, yet only a limited number of students are either interested in or hired by these employers. At most college and university career centers, the focus is not on placement but on job search skill development (the “teach them to fish rather than give them fish” philosophy). Your student will be best served by gaining career exploration and job search skills and taking a proactive approach in his or her own career development. This means seeking out hands-on learning opportunities (internships, co-ops, and so on) through the college and on his or her own.

The fourth segment ends by pulling together the results of all the activities completed to this point so that your student can determine his or her current college major and career direction status. This printout prompts your student to identify top preferences, unanswered questions, and current college major and career needs. (In the sixth and final segment, your student will learn about college career centers and career centers in general and get action steps he or she can take to get pending questions answered and assessed needs met.)

### **How you can support your student**

*In this segment, I talk about how some career areas have strict college major requirements. Then I direct your student to select some career interests from the career interest activity completed in the third segment and practice doing some digging to determine the level of flexibility with choice of a college major for top career interests. This type of research can get quite challenging for students. For some career areas, the answers are straightforward and relatively easy to find. In other cases, research will reveal conflicting opinions from those who have direct knowledge about this career field. It's likely that adult mentor support will become valuable as your student researches and considers a college major relative to favorite career interests. Your student can begin this digging by thinking about resources that might support information gathering and may well come up with the idea to do keyword searches on the Internet. Online searches are a great way to gather information about career areas of interest. If your student gets stuck, you might suggest additional resources like speaking with those employed in career interest areas and school counselors, career professionals, or local librarians. Of course, you can help with this research too.*

*The Building the Bridge idea presented in this segment may leave your student (and you) wondering how and when to begin exploring career interests. The nature and extent of exploration and experimentation activities can vary depending on your student's age and exploration goals. High schools offer programs and services to support these activities and, as you would expect, the exploration methods used and the depth of the hands-on learning activities will differ from those at the college level. Of course, the point is to get students out*

*there in the world at a pace and in a way that's appropriate and manageable for your student. Beyond school support, you may have family friends or relatives (again, yourself included) with experience, knowledge, or contacts in career fields of interest to your student. As before, let them take the initiative in making these contacts as much as possible. What a wonderful jump-start for your student if he or she can increase abilities and level of comfort when speaking with adults about career trends, everyday work realities, and career experimentation strategies.*

## **5 – Major Myths and Major Tips**

In this segment, I use a game format to test students' ability to distinguish between reality and common misperceptions related to college majors and careers. In the video, the following six statements are offered, one by one, and your student is asked to guess whether each statement is a myth or a fact.



I then reveal the correct answer along with my reason for it.

### **Statement #1 - In today's economy, a college degree is the ticket to a great job. MYTH OR FACT?**

This statement is a myth. Given the cost of a college education these days, the idea that a college degree is not a ticket to a great job can be a tough concept to follow for both students and parents. Some people would argue that the benefits of a college education are overrated, especially in relation to the expense. While I don't believe that college is for everyone and could offer examples of people who have been highly successful without obtaining a college education, I did not mention this in the video because the program is targeting those who are college-bound. There are many great reasons for going to college and countless benefits from getting a college education. Yet, no matter what the college major, to support the goal of landing a great job, I strongly encourage combining a college education with hands-on career-related experience.

### **Statement #2 - There are many ways to approach picking a college major. An approach to avoid is selecting a major because of high job market demand. MYTH OR FACT?**

This statement is a fact. If you have seen the film *The Graduate*, you may recall a scene in which the main character, played by Dustin Hoffman, attended a graduation party thrown in his honor. At that party, a well-meaning friend used one word to recommend a career area that was hot at the time the film was made. I can almost hear you yelling out the answer as you read this—plastics. Yes, the plastics industry was very hot in the late 1960s. Of course, the hot career suggestions given to graduating seniors now would differ from those from years ago, but the supply and demand shifts referenced in the video have always existed. Please don't get me wrong—I am not suggesting avoiding careers that are in high demand. What I am suggesting is exploring genuine career interests

as a main focus. Then, I'd suggest having your student experience these top interest areas directly, including talking with people employed in those interest areas. Those with direct experience are best suited to offer information about job market trends in areas of interest along with things your student can do when the job market is tight.

I also cite the film *The Graduate* for another reason. This film emphasizes the struggles between two generations with the age-old conflict between what parents value and want for their children and children's need to find their own way and sometimes rebel against the status quo in the process. What if your student selects a career interest that is in line with his or her passions but is not hot in the marketplace or is not in line with your values? It is not always easy to empower a child to examine their options, available resources, and lifestyle preferences (including the corresponding expenses!) and then support them in exploring the reality of their choices and making their own way as they see fit. Perhaps it will help if you view the career development process as an opportunity for your child to learn about and experience life while gaining valuable insights and wisdom along the way. In the video, I encourage students to explore areas that truly interest them. I've worked with way too many discontented adults not to. The question before you is whether or not you will support your student in a direction of their own choosing.

**Statement #3 - Exploring the connection between college majors and careers reveals that picking a major and picking a career is the same thing.**

**MYTH OR FACT?**

This statement is a myth. If student viewers pay attention during the fourth segment, The College Major and Career Connection, the correct answer to this statement should be obvious. Many students buy into this myth and tend to pick a college major as if they're selecting a career. In the video, I address this issue and, when reviewing this statement, I also talk about liberal arts majors and some myths associated with them. The third and fourth segments of the DVD offer another way of thinking about college majors and careers. The goal here is to open your student to a broader perspective of possibilities when considering the connection between choice of a college major and career direction.

**Statement #4 - It's important to take your time when picking a college major because the major you pick now will determine your lifelong career.**

**MYTH OR FACT?**

This statement is a myth. This is another statement that helps to put the college major decision-making process in perspective. One of the reasons why students might stress so much about choosing a college major is that they believe they will be stuck in one career direction forever as a result of their college major choice. I encourage a big-picture perspective and the notion that career change is likely in your student's future. With trends related to shifts in technological change as well as the potential for mergers and layoffs, this broad-based view will help your student to keep career shifts and choice of a college major in perspective.

**Statement #5 - Campus activities, including social and recreational activities, count as experience for future career development.**

**MYTH OR FACT?**

This statement is a fact. Skills are skills, and many skills can transfer from one setting and job function to another. Along with allowing some activities to be strictly for fun, non-work-related activities can be valuable in one's career development. Please encourage your student to get involved in non-academic activities for all the reasons mentioned in the video.

**Statement #6 - For added insurance against a tight job market, earn a double (or triple) major to make you more marketable.**

**MYTH OR FACT?**

This statement is a myth. I read an article about a growing trend for college students to declare triple majors in an effort to make sure they land a job no matter what the job market is like at the time of graduation. Yet the article did not emphasize job shadowing, internships, and other forms of hands-on experience as a way of adding a degree of extra marketability at graduation time. It also did not emphasize informational interviewing, a strategy for gathering information and beginning to build a network that involves asking someone employed in a career of interest for advice on how to break into that field, especially when the job market is tight. On another important point, the article made no mention of what a triple major might cost in terms of added time, energy, and money. Your student might be able to fit in a double major and still graduate in four years. If this is the case and he or she has two subject areas of interest, a double major could be a great choice. Just note that there are many ways to make your student more marketable other than by declaring a double or triple major. I hope that this will turn into a mantra that both you and your student can say in your sleep: Be sure to gain hands-on experience related to your career interests, even if it's not required and has to be as an unpaid volunteer or intern.

The printout that goes with Segment 5 offers tips for selecting a college major. Your student is directed to look over the tips that are offered and to circle, and follow, those that would be helpful.

**How you can support your student**

*Watch the Myth or Fact game with them or have an open discussion about the facts and myths that were covered in this segment. You may be able to share real-life experiences (your own or those of someone you know) that will add an extra dimension to the issues addressed in this segment of the program. Parents can influence the career development of their students in many ways, and one of them is through stories of real-life experiences.*

**6 – Rate the College Career Center**

When college tuition fees are paid, student support services, including career services, are automatically included in those fees. This means that these

services are available to all students at no extra charge. Yet, since participation in college career services is largely optional, students do not always take advantage of these services. (This is true at the high school level as well.) In this final segment, I work to dispel some common myths associated with college and university career centers. Plus, through the handout that goes with this segment, I help your student understand how his or her career and college major needs (as assessed at the end of Segment 4) relate to services typically offered by career centers. All your student has to do is look up his or her needs and he or she will find a short list of questions for a career center based on the needs indicated. While this activity focuses on college career centers, your student can also use it to check out high school career services or services offered through a community-based resource.

### **How you can support your student**

*It's best to encourage your student to get answers to the questions provided on his or her own. If, however, the student is shy or hesitant for some reason, you can inquire about services offered on your student's behalf. If you haven't seen the handout that goes with this final segment, look it over. When you're clear about your student's current needs, you'll be able to look up the questions to ask career center staff. Parents are not permitted to sit in on career counseling sessions (for confidentiality reasons), but you can inquire about and encourage your student to take advantage of services that will meet indicated needs and build on what was started through this program.*



## **Parting Words**

As a result of your influence and support, your student has my DVD program available to guide him or her in the search for a college major and career direction. When your student completes the program, he or she will have gained insight and knowledge for making effective decisions and a concrete personalized game plan, or road map, for taking action on his or her own behalf. Your student may also find it helpful to review the DVD and User Guide again in the months ahead as needed.

As the parent of a younger child (14 years old at the time of this writing), I can only imagine the mixture of emotions that you might be feeling as your child prepares for adulthood. What better gift can we give our children than the resources, skills, and confidence to shape their own futures?

My best wishes to you and your student as you move forward.

Sincerely,

*Susan Posluszny*