

Choosing a Major: A Guide for Families

Objectives

1. Assist you in supporting your student as they decide on or change their academic major.
2. Identify resources available to help students make decisions.

Check In With Your Student

Choosing a major can be difficult and stressful for some students. Be aware of how your student has approached past decisions, since everyone makes choices differently. Some students need a great deal of information and then time to process that information before making a decision. Other students make decisions by talking through their options and thoughts with other people, such as family members, faculty, or advisors. These students need someone to listen and give feedback in order to make a choice. Once you know how your student makes decisions, you will be more aware of signs that he or she needs assistance with choosing a major, and you can be ready to provide support if needed.

Encourage Academic Planning Now

Become familiar with timelines for declaring a major. FSU has implemented a MAPPING program (www.academic-guide.fsu.edu) that requires students to complete certain “milestone” courses for intended majors. Prior to declaring a major, students have the option of being an *exploratory* major. Exploratory students focus on engaging in activities which help them explore their academic and career interests and move toward declaring a major.

Florida State University *strongly encourages* students to select a departmental major by the end of their first year. Declaring a major at this time enables students to meet academic milestones and prerequisites for their intended departmental major and graduate in a timely manner. Not meeting milestones and prerequisites may prevent students from registering for classes and require them to meet with an academic advisor.

You can assist your student by encouraging them to plan for this upcoming deadline, rather than waiting until the very last moment. Waiting until a school-imposed deadline may introduce additional stress and reduce the student’s major options.



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If students start early in their college experience, they will have ample time to gain assistance from campus academic and career advising services. Other activities students may want to complete to assist them in making their major decision include:

- Examining their values, interests, and skills
- Exploring career paths and majors
- Taking courses in areas of possible interest
- Talking to faculty and other students in various academic departments
- Speaking with professionals in different career fields
- Getting some firsthand experience through an internship or job-shadow program to help narrow down their career choices

Understand Your Student's Options

Become more knowledgeable about the undergraduate majors offered. A list of FSU undergraduate majors is available online at the Undergraduate Academic Program Guide, www.academic-guide.fsu.edu. This guide provides a description for each major, an academic planning timeline (called a "map") showing the course sequence recommended for students in that program, and a link to the academic department housing each major.

Students may not always be able to pursue their first major choice. Some programs have *requirements* (usually prerequisite courses that must be completed, a grade-point average minimum, or both), and only students who meet those requirements can be accepted into the program. Other majors, known as *limited-access* majors, require students to apply and compete with other applicants for limited space in the program. You and your student will want to determine if any of the majors he/she is considering have requirements, or are limited-access, long before the deadline to declare a major. For any majors of interest that are limited-access, you will want to know the application process and deadline dates.

Finally, it may happen that your student explores majors and career interests and determines that the specific program he/she would most like to enter is not offered at FSU. Students can use the College Board's Big Future webpage, bigfuture.collegeboard.org/majors-careers, as well as Focus 2, an online resource, to view alternative majors. (<http://www.career.fsu.edu/Students/Plan-Your-Career/Explore-Majors-and-Careers/FOCUS2>) Students should talk with academic and career advisors about alternative majors that might help them reach their academic and career goals.

Link Majors to Occupations

While many college degree programs can prepare students for working in a variety of career fields, students typically find they are more interested in and perform better in classes where the subject matter is related to their interests. There are also some career fields (such as accounting, chemical engineering, special education, etc.) where the specific major is much more directly connected to particular job requirements. Broaden your understanding of how academic majors and career fields are related. When you are aware of the relationship between majors and career fields, you can better help your student explore majors based on career interests. If your student does

not yet have well-defined career interests, you will better understand why they may be having some difficulty choosing a major. For ideas on how majors relate to occupations, view The Career Center's Matching Majors to Occupations handouts at www.career.fsu.edu/Resources/Match-Major-Sheets.

Ask Us For Help!

Finally, familiarize yourself with various campus services available to help your student in exploring options and making educational and career choices. These services include:

Advising First

Advising First is a network of academic advisors within the Division of Undergraduate Studies. Advising First advisors are available to talk with students and are very knowledgeable about courses and academic requirements for each major offered. Advisors are housed within academic departments across campus including a central advising center, the Center for Exploratory Students, located on the ground floor of the William Johnston Building (WJB). For more on advising services, visit www.advisingfirst.fsu.edu.

The Career Center

The Career Center offers one-on-one, drop-in career advising at the Dunlap Success Center (DSC) where students can speak with career advisors about their academic and career interests. Career advisors are trained to help students whether they need to look more closely at their values, interests, and skills or if they need to explore majors and occupations in-depth. After an initial meeting, students requiring more assistance may be referred to an individual career counseling appointment based on their particular needs. For more information, call (850) 644-6431.

Workshops and Related Events

The Career Center and Advising First sponsor workshops, information sessions, and related events throughout the year to provide students with information about choosing a major and to help them in making a choice. The Career Center also hosts several employer events, offering students an opportunity to speak with employers in different industries and career fields, learn the academic preparation those employers value in college graduates, and explore opportunities for gaining experience through interning in a particular work setting. More information on Career Center events can be found at www.career.fsu.edu/Students/Events.

Career Planning Class (SDS 3340)

Introduction to Career Development is a one- to three-credit undergraduate course that focuses on learning about individual values, interests, and skills and how that information can be used in making career decisions. It also helps students look at broader issues in the world of work, including the labor market, global economy, dual career couple issues, organizational culture, and entering the job market. Learn more about the class at www.career.fsu.edu/Students/Plan-Your-Career/SDS-3340-Introduction-to-Career-Development.

Experiential Learning Programs

The Career Center's experiential learning unit specializes in helping students gain experience to make a more informed choice of major or career field. The team assists students with locating internships, co-op programs, job shadow opportunities, and other career-related opportunities. Students who are registered with SeminoleLink *Plus!* services can access these opportunities. SeminoleLink is The Career Center's online jobs database. More information on this tool can be found at www.career.fsu.edu/SeminoleLink.

Tips for Supporting Your Student

Use this list below to help you evaluate and explore ways you might encourage and support your student.

Support

- Allow my student to have new experiences
- Encourage exploration of new ideas and occupations
- Demonstrate willingness to tolerate ideas and values which are different than my own
- Really listen to what my student tells me
- Express positivity and support when my student makes a poor decision or fails

Information

- Speak openly and honestly about my current job, including both pros and cons
- Express willingness to discuss my own career development history
- Encourage my student to learn about occupations of interest by talking, observing, reading, and trying them out

Personal Insights

- Help my student look at his or her strengths and weaknesses and suggest how these strengths and weaknesses might relate to various career areas and courses of study
- Compliment my student on his or her good points and accomplishments
- Help my student think about occupations he or she might be good at without allowing my personal bias to carry too much weight

Contacts

- Refer my student to friends and acquaintances who might discuss their occupation
- Actively participate in helping my student locate experiences that will help my student explore potential career fields
- Allow my student to use my personal/professional contacts for employment networking after graduation

Motivation

- Encourage activities that promote career development, while not emphasizing what has not been done
- Assist my student in setting reasonable goals without insisting that my expectations be met
- Ask questions that will encourage my student's further career information-seeking behavior

Summary

We are happy to work with your student through the process of choosing an occupation and/or field of study... in fact, the sooner the better! We hope this guide has provided some useful information about the process involved in choosing a major and career field, as well as campus resources that can help your student throughout this process.

Additional Resources

- Career Center website - www.career.fsu.edu/Alumni-Family-Community/Family-Member-Resources
- Harris, M. B., & Jones, S. L. (2007). *The Parents Crash Course in Career Planning: Helping Your College Student Succeed*. Lincolnwood, IL: VGM Career Horizons.

