

Choosing a Major: A Guide for Families

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Objective

Choosing a major may be easy for some students and more difficult for others, but for every student it is a milestone that must be met to successfully graduate. This guide is designed to help you support your student with this important decision.

Check in with Your Student

First, understand that 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 lots of information and then time to process that information. Other students make decisions by talking through their options and thoughts with another person, such as a parent, faculty member, or advisor. They 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.



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Start Academic Planning Now

Become familiar with timelines for declaring a major. FSU has implemented a MAPPING program (www.registrar.fsu.edu/acad_maps/) 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 moving toward declaring a major. Florida State University strongly encourages students to select a departmental major by end of their Freshman 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 him/her to plan for this upcoming deadline, and not wait until the very last moment. Waiting until a school-imposed deadline may introduce additional stress and reduce the student’s major options. If students start early in their college experience, they will have time to examine their skills and interests, explore career paths and majors, take courses in areas of possible interest, talk to faculty and other students in various academic departments, speak with professionals in different career fields, and perhaps even get some firsthand experience through an internship or job-shadow program to help narrow down their career choices. They will also have ample time to gain assistance from academic and career advising services on campus.

Understand Your 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 either prerequisite courses that must be completed, or 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 Undergraduate Academic Program Guide to research alternative majors at www.academic-guide.fsu.edu, as well as a Florida-based online resource FACTS (Florida Academic Counseling and Tracking for Students, www.facts.org). 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

Broaden your understanding of how academic majors and career fields are related. 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. When you are aware of the relationship between majors and career fields, you can better help your student explore majors based on career interests. And if your student does not yet have well-defined career interests, you will better understand why he/she may be having some difficulty choosing a major. For ideas of how majors relate to occupations, view the Career Center's Match Major sheets at www.career.fsu.edu/occupations/matchmajor/.

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 26 academic departments across campus including a central advising center serving Exploratory majors in 213 Eppes. 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 skills, interests, and important

work requirements or if they need to explore occupations and majors 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 throughout the year, 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 info on Career Center events can be found at www.career.fsu.edu.

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/courses/sds3340.

Experiential Education Programs

The Career Center's experiential education unit specializes in helping students gain experience to make a more informed choice of major or career field. They assist students with locating internships, co-op programs, job shadow opportunities, and 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.

Answer These Questions

When planning to talk with your student about his or her academic and career plans, consider these key areas and questions:

Support

- Do I allow my student to have new experiences?
- Do I encourage exploration of new ideas and occupations without pushing too hard?
- Am I willing to tolerate ideas and values which are different than my own?

Personal Insights

- Do I help my student look at his/her strengths and weaknesses and suggest how they might relate to various career areas and courses of study?
- Do I compliment my student on his/her good points and accomplishments?
- Do I help my student think about occupations that he/she would be good at without allowing my personal bias to carry too much weight?

Information

- Do I talk openly and honestly about my current job, including both pros and cons?
- Am I willing to discuss my own career development history?

- Do I encourage my student to learn about occupations of interest by talking, observing, reading, and trying them out?

Contacts

- Am I willing to refer my student to friends and acquaintances who might discuss their occupation with her/him?
- Am I willing to help my student locate experiences that will help him/her explore potential career fields?
- Am I willing to allow my student to use my personal/professional contacts for employment networking after graduation?

Motivation

- Do I encourage activities that promote career development, while not emphasizing what has not been done?
- Am I willing to assist my family member in setting reasonable goals without insisting that my expectations be met?
- Do I ask questions that will encourage my family member's further career information-seeking behavior?

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 Information

Career Center website

www.career.fsu.edu/advising/support/

Harris, M. B., & Jones, S. L. (2007). *The Parents Crash Course in Career Planning: Helping Your College Student Succeed*. Lincolnwood, IL: VGM Career Horizons.



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