



EMPOWERING CHOICES: INSIGHTS AND ADVICE FOR PARENTS AND TEENS ON MAJOR AND CAREER EXPLORATION



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INTRODUCTION

When I was an academic adviser at the [University of Chicago](#), I regularly talked to both students and parents about choosing classes, majors, and careers. In particular, I led sessions for parents of first-year students during Parents Weekend every fall. At the start of each of these sessions, I asked the parents to raise their hand if they were currently in a career that had a relationship to their undergraduate college major. There were usually some laughs as people looked to their right and left. In that room of about 100 middle-aged adults, only five to ten typically raised their hands. So, what does this tell us? People would like to think there's a strong correlation between college majors and careers, but in fact, that's just not true AND it hasn't been true for many years.

WHAT'S IN A MAJOR?

Many people think of majors as a body of knowledge. While that is true, majors are also designed to build a certain set of skills. As a college admissions professional, I encourage families to focus more on skills than knowledge. While knowledge can grow and change over time, especially in our world of technology, skills require a certain level of development and usually don't become obsolete over time.

Certain majors build vital skills that are transferable to a wide variety of jobs. I encourage parents to focus on that skill-building and help their students articulate the skills they have and how those skills relate to future work. Let's look at a few examples. English majors focus on analyzing text and writing skills. Engineers often take on problem-solving by using complex math. Psychology majors consider how they can test people to find patterns in different ways of thinking. All of these majors use skills that can also be used in teaching, business, law, and a variety of other professions.

HOW CAN WE KNOW WHAT SKILLS TO FOCUS ON?

There are jobs today that did not exist five or ten years ago. There are jobs that will exist five to ten years into the future that we can't even predict today. Technology is changing our world of work at a rapid pace, which impacts jobs. At the end of the day though, I believe service fields are the future of work. Machines might be able to deliver disease-fighting medication, but we still need humans to hold our hands as we recover and faces to empathize with us when we are sick. There are also certain skills like communication, adaptation, time management, and collaboration that are universal and needed in every job. Focusing on the fundamentals will always lead to success because they will never disappear.

HOW CAN PARENTS AND GUARDIANS HELP THEIR CHILDREN WITH CHOOSING CLASSES, MAJORS, AND CAREERS?

- **Tell them what they're great at!** We all tend to think that the things we are good at are not important. We believe that if it's easy for us, it must be easy for others. This is NOT true! We each have skills and talents that others envy. Help your child identify their strengths so they can think about how they might use them in the future.
- **Remind them to push their boundaries and get out of their comfort zone.** As humans, we always want to learn and grow. Our minds are often most engaged when we have a task in front of us that is just slightly too hard for us because we are learning from that work. Also, how will we know what we like or don't like until we try it?
- **Help them with the research.** There are tons of resources to help students learn about careers, but they might need help sorting it all out. You can look at the [online Occupational Network \(ONet\)](#) and [LinkedIn](#) as starting points to see what others are doing.

- **Listen and repeat back to them what you hear.** As your child talks about what they learn, pay attention to their words, tone, and body language. Reflect back to them the pieces that they seem most excited about so they can learn more.
- **Encourage them to work.** Most students will benefit from getting a summer or after-school job. Colleges LOVE students who work because they know these young people have developed skills they might not have been exposed to in the typical classroom, like working with difficult customers, collaborating with different age groups, applying feedback, and learning to quickly complete brand-new tasks.

SIX TOP ACTIVITIES FAMILIES CAN DO TOGETHER (OR WITH A COLLEGE COUNSELOR) TO HELP STUDENTS GET CLOSER TO FINDING A GREAT-FIT MAJOR.

1

Browse a bookstore with them. See what books your teen opens and which sections they pass by without a thought. What do they want to learn more about? Parents can help by asking their teens to reflect on these choices.

2

Look at a list of majors with them. Pick a college and print/copy the list of majors. Then have your teen cross out anything they aren't interested in, circle any possibilities, and investigate the majors they don't know much about. It may also be helpful to point out that not all schools have all the majors, but they might have something similar. For instance, at some schools Neuroscience is in the Biology department, while at others it might be in the Psychology department or as a standalone major. You can also aim for a career in business but major in business, finance, marketing, economics, or a host of other related majors!

- 3 Use the internet with your student to research.** Check out videos on YouTube about particular fields, Google “what can I do with a major in...,” and check out college academic departments for more details.
- 4 Work backwards.** If your student has a specific career in mind, you can help them think about what knowledge and skills they may need to pursue it. What disciplines will help in that future career?
- 5 Encourage them to take a free online class.** Students shouldn’t wait until college to explore classes! They can take a free course on a platform like [Coursera](#), [EdX](#), or [Udemy](#) for a taste of a future major (without the expensive tuition!).
- 6 Ask them to think about a big question or problem they want to solve.** What skills would they need to find possible solutions? These discussions might provide clues to a student’s future major or career.

CONCLUSION

Making decisions about majors and careers is not easy, but you can help your teen choose wisely. Have open dialogue with them and don’t pressure them to make a decision too soon. The students who often do the best with this process are the ones who are open to exploration. It might take them longer to decide, but the decision is often a stronger, more deliberate one.



COLLEGEWISE COUNSELOR BIO

Anita Doddi Gajula, Collegewise College Admissions Counselor

Anita has spent her entire career in service of students—as a student affairs professional at Macalester, as an academic advisor at U Chicago, as a College Admissions Advisor both in her own practice and in other firms, and now as a Collegewise counselor. She’s helped hundreds of students through the college admissions process, whether it be through test prep, college application management, or essay support.



Anita earned her bachelor’s degree in psychology at Williams College and went on to earn her master’s in student affairs and academic support at the University of Michigan. She now resides in Chicago with her family. Anita has a knack for building relationships quickly and making seemingly unrelated connections between people and ideas, which comes in handy when she’s helping students identify and apply to their best-fit schools. When Anita isn’t counseling, she’s a leader for her daughter’s Girl Scout troop, enjoys taekwondo, and loves playing with her pup, Pongo.

COLLEGEWISE COMPANY BIO

For over 25 years, [Collegewise](#) has been at the forefront of college counseling and tutoring, ensuring that families, schools, and nonprofits have the most up-to-date, honest information about admissions. Collegewise is committed to helping communities around the world understand that applying to university should be an exciting time, not a stressful, anxiety-ridden rite of passage.

With more than 500 years of combined experience, Collegewise's expert counselors have guided 30,000 students from all walks of life. From navigating high school to finding their students' ideal university matches and securing acceptances, Collegewise counselors infuse the process with a sense of calm and joy, giving families the confidence they need to succeed.

Collegewise also partners with schools and outside counselors to enhance the college application experience within their communities. The company develops an array of free events, guides, podcasts, and blog posts, so every family can embark on a less stressful and more successful journey to college.

If you are interested in learning about Collegewise's 1:1 services, please visit [collegewise.com](#) to schedule a free one-on-one consultation with an expert program advisor. During the 45-minute meeting, your advisor will answer all of your pressing questions and gain a deep understanding of your family's goals. Then, they'll develop a personalized program, which may include: college counseling support, development of success skills, extracurricular and leadership guidance, athletic recruitment support, and/or financial aid and scholarship support.

Looking for more? Check out additional resources below:

- [Upcoming Webinars & Seminars](#)
- [Resource Library](#)
- [Wiser Notes: The Collegewise Blog](#)