

How Assessment Can Help You Choose a Major or Career

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Where to go . . .

When you were a kid, you probably knew exactly what you wanted to be when you grew up.

Today, you may not be so sure.

The good news is that if you haven't yet declared your major or zeroed in on a career you'd like to pursue, there's still time. Better yet, you don't have to agonize over these decisions. Your career center can steer you in the right direction.

The center staff can't make academic or career decisions for you. You can, by scheduling counseling sessions with the staff and using other resources available through your career center, including assessment tools.

These tools can tell you a lot about yourself, including things you aren't aware of or haven't thought much about. Or, they may verify what you already know.

"One of our students had a great deal of interest in art and law," recalls A. Charles Kovacs, director of career services at Bates College in Lewiston, Maine. "We used various tools to gauge her interest in these fields. We then looked at potential career opportunities that would correspond with her interests, such as a graphic designer for a law firm or a legal adviser/consultant to artists."

In general, assessment tools help you:

- Identify your strengths and weaknesses—what you do well and what you could do better.
- Pinpoint your interests and match them with your strengths.
- Clarify your values, specifically what matters to you, e.g., making a lot of money or feeling that what you do makes a difference, working alone or as a part of a team.
- Look at the overlap among your strengths, interests, and values to identify corresponding majors or careers.

"It depends on what the issue is," says Jean Wilcox, career counselor at University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. "Assessment can help an undecided freshman pick a major or help a sophomore consider career options. Assessment can also help a junior focus on a career goal and look at course work to meet that goal or give the senior a start on his or her job search."

Career counselors also recommend that students do not look at assessment as a once-and-done proposition, but to do it periodically. After all, your interests and skills will change over time.

The Many Types of Assessment Tools

From "Compass" and "Discover" to "FOCUS II" and "Please Understand Me," a wide variety of assessment tools are available to identify your skills, interests, preferences, values, and abilities.

Which, if any, you use will depend on what your career counselor suggests and what your specific needs are.

Here are a few of the more typical tools, according to Robin Lipkin, career counselor, and Michelle Watson, assistant director of career services, at Lehigh University, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

Myers-Briggs Type Indicator can help you determine your personal preferences and strengths based on four dimensions that describe a specific personality type:

- focus of energy (introversion vs. extraversion);
- information gathering methods (concrete facts vs. meanings and possibilities);
- decision-making preferences (objective vs. subjective); and
- lifestyle preferences (planned and orderly vs. spontaneous and less structured).

"This is an excellent tool for discovering your strengths and applying them to matching occupations and working environments," Lipkin says.

SIGI Plus is a computerized guidance program that is useful to students in evaluating their values, interests, and activities and making decisions about their career choices.

“Two features can help you create lists of occupations based on a ranking of your values, interests, and activities, and to find more in-depth information about these occupations,” Watson says.

Strong Interest Inventory matches students, based on their likes and dislikes, with individuals who share their interests, to determine if the students might enjoy the same kind of careers as those individuals. Students are provided with three sets of information:

A combination of general interest scales (realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, and conventional) that provide an overall picture of the student’s preferences, values, and interests;

Basic interest scales that target specific subcategories of general scales and further narrow down interests and desirable aspects of potential careers (such as writing, public speaking, computers, teaching); and

A list of 10 careers, corresponding to a three-letter code, that encourages further exploration.

Self-Directed Search is very similar to the Strong Interest Inventory and based on the same premise. The student receives a three-letter code that describes his or her personality/career type. An accompanying booklet provides listings of careers upon which careers can be selected by code for further research.

Besides these, many other exercises are devised by career counselors to help students figure out what they want to be and do.

Rachel Seff, director of the career services center at University of Houston-College of Business Administration, has students go through the Sunday classifieds and circle every job that interests them—whether or not they have the needed skills. Then, she suggests that they pick out ads for jobs that would “turn their stomachs.” A pattern soon starts to emerge and enables Seff to identify potential majors and careers for students.

Several assessment tools are also available online, including:

- Steps to Career/Life Planning Success
- Career Planning Process
- Coaching for Success, Inc.

While you can use assessment tools independently of the career center, you stand to benefit more by selecting tools with a career counselor. This is the person who can provide context for the results, help you prioritize the data, and help you identify careers that might suit you.

Assessment tools, including SIGI Plus and the Keirse Character Sorter, gave Gwendolen Goodale career direction.

“I was always interested in agriculture, but I didn’t want to work in production or as a teacher,” she says. Assessment confirmed her interest in the field and influenced her decision to pursue a degree in agricultural communication. In May 2000, Goodale graduated from North Carolina State University’s College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, with an eye on a public relations career with an agricultural firm.

“Assessment isn’t intended to pigeonhole you,” says Goodale. “It’s a way of learning more about yourself, what you like, and what you might enjoy doing for a living.”

“What assessment does give you is structure and direction,” says Al Aubin, associate director of the UCLA career center. By direction, Aubin isn’t referring to just one way of going career-wise. “Assessment can show you all the options available to you,” he says.

Technology has streamlined the assessment process, with a growing number of tools available online. So, you may be wondering: Can you do this stuff yourself, independent of your career center?

“In some ways, I think the more tools you use, the more you’ll get out of assessment,” Aubin says. “But, you stand to benefit most by selecting tools with a career counselor.” This is the person who can provide context for the results, prioritize the data, and help you identify careers that might suit you.

The Added Benefits of Assessment

Gaining a direction and sharpening your focus are great reasons to undergo assessment, but they’re not the only ones.

For one thing, investing time up front can pay huge dividends when it comes to conducting a job search.

“As a job seeker, you’ll be creating a resume and interviewing with employers,” says Jean Wilcox, career

counselor at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. “In those instances, you must be able to articulate your interests and abilities. Through assessment, you can get a better handle on what you can bring to a job and what you want to get out of it.”

Wilcox adds that some students think of an interview solely as a means for an employer to evaluate a candidate. “It also is an opportunity for you to determine whether it’s the kind of organization where you want to work,” she says. If you have a strong sense of your skills and values, you’ll be in a better position to make that decision. If you happen to receive two or more offers, having that kind of insight will also work to your advantage.”

The benefits of assessment don’t end there. Career services practitioners point out that it can help you to:

- Identify areas for self-improvement, e.g., oral communication, and decide how to hone your skills in those areas.
- Decide if you want to continue your education and, if so, where to apply.

- Build your confidence in yourself and confirm that you’ve chosen the right career direction.

Assessment can be worth your while even if you have narrowed your career goals to a fine point. Given the fickle nature of the world of work, it’s wise to be aware of all your options.

Now is the Time

If you’ve put off career planning until now, it’s time to take stock of your situation—to figure out where you are and where you’d like to be beyond graduation. In fact, this may be the best time to do it.

“As you wrap up your degree requirements, you’ve got a lot of life experience behind you,” says Andrew Ceperley, director of career services at the University of California-San Diego. “With that experience, you will have a better idea of how to apply what you learn from assessment.”

You’ve come a long way already; your degree is within your reach. Now is the time to embark on a voyage of self-discovery and figure out where you want to go.