Thinking Critically About Your Choice of Major

This tool is intended to assist you in effectively managing your career exploration, planning, and decision making related to your choice of major. When choosing a major course of study, it is essential to take initiative, be intentional, and have goals in mind. Through exploration and “testing out” ideas of interest, your plan may shift or change – that’s completely natural! Stay flexible, and take advantage of the rich resources and support persons who are ready to walk alongside you on your path to choosing your major.

Assess

Assess, articulate and develop your strengths, interests and values. Begin to explore majors that are congruent with your awareness of self.

Engage

Purposefully engage in opportunities and with resources that will set you on the path to deciding on your major. Target opportunities where you can apply and further develop your skill sets, grow your experience base, and explore areas of interest.

Experience & Evaluation

Take time to evaluate the experiences and assessments you have completed thus far. What have you learned about yourself, and how can you translate this new awareness into your choice of major?

Transition

Now that you have decided on a major, what is next? Begin to articulate a plan and take action to translate your skills and experiences into meaningful opportunities.

For Undeclared Majors

The Career & Professional Development Plan
Assess

Who am I & where am I going?

Understanding the relationship between major and career options is a critical first step in your decision-making process. In some cases, career fields demand a specific academic path. For example, teachers are expected to have an education degree, nurses, a nursing degree, and so on. In most cases, however, the relationship is not so clear cut. A major can open the doorway to many career possibilities, and it is up to you to make the most of your experience both in and out of the classroom and apply it to a particular field.

There are several options available to assist you in the process of assessing and developing your strengths, interests and values, and determine how they translate into a major course of study. Identify resources from the bulleted list below to begin building important foundations to decision making.

What tools should I be using?

- Take a self-assessment inventory, such as FOCUS, available through the Career Center, to help you begin narrowing down your interests, strengths, and values.
- Check out the resources on the “Explore Career Options” section of the Career Center’s website. These helpful resources include: “What Can I Do With a Major In…?”, O*Net, and the Occupational Outlook Handbook.
- As you research career fields of interest to you, think critically about each area. What is the nature of the work and work environment? What skills and experiences are highly desirable? What are some of the behind-the-scenes tasks?

What opportunities are available?

- Schedule an appointment with a Career Coach in the Career Center in order to construct a customized decision-making plan, utilizing our “Choosing a Major” exercise.
- Attend the “Choosing a Major” Workshop, which is conducted by the Career Center every fall.
- Attend alumni panels or career exploration events held by departments of interest to you.
- Learn what alumni and other professionals are doing with their degrees through the Alumni Post-Grad Report, alumni profiles on the Career Center’s website, and the “Messiah College Professional Network” on LinkedIn.
- Attend the “Undeclared/Still Deciding Days,” which are sponsored by the Career Center. Contact the Career Center for dates and times at 717-691-6016 or extension 6016.

Reflection Q’s

- How would I describe my skills, interests, and values?
- Considering past and present experiences, what energizes me most? (Be specific!)
- How are these aspects of myself shaping my decisions about a major?
- What other information do I need in order to choose a major?
Engage

How can I gain practical experiences to help me decide on my major?

Don’t just become involved. **Intentionally** choose activities and experiences that will allow you to apply and develop transferable skill sets while exploring potential areas of interest. Consider the following options to stay on track.

What can I do to test out my interests?

- **Strategically choose co-curricular activities in areas that peak your interest.** Employers and grad schools value quality over quantity, so invest in meaningful opportunities. Consider seeking a leadership role in an activity or student organization.

- **Explore options for involvement** outside of the classroom through offices such as Student Involvement & Leadership Programs, the Agapé Center for Service & Learning, Study Abroad, College Ministries, Residence Life, Multicultural Programs and much more. Consider choosing one area to get involved. Utilize these resources to “try out” different areas that may be of interest to you, develop your leadership skills, and broaden your knowledge base.

- **Conduct an informational interview** or initiate a job shadowing experience with a professional in a field that interests you. The Messiah College Professional Network can be a great resource for this endeavor.

- **Consider enrolling in an introductory course** in a major that interests you.

What resources would be helpful?

- **Ask faculty in the departments of interest to you to refer you to an upperclass student** in the major who can talk about their experience. Be sure to ask them direct, pointed questions: Why did they declare this major? What do they like and dislike about the coursework? What might they have done differently?

What can help me in this process?

- **Meet with a Career Coach** to discuss where you’re at and any adjustments that should be made to your decision making plan.

- **Get to know faculty** from various departments that are of interest to you. Take advantage of office hours and department activities. Become familiar with the department websites.

Reflection Q’s

- What real-life experiences might be help me choose my major course of study?

- How can I apply what I’m learning to my decision-making process?

- Am I focusing on quality rather than quantity?
**Experience & Evaluation**

**How do I make the most of my self-assessments & practical experiences?**

It’s time to take stock of the career explorations, research, and self-assessments you have completed thus far. What did you learn about yourself and the career fields you have considered? What course of study can you excel in?

As you enter this **evaluation phase** of your decision-making process, remember that the coaches in the Career Center are available to assist you. Now would be a great time to re-visit your individualized plan and discuss what you have discovered about yourself and your choice of major.

**What is your decision-making style?**

- We each have a **unique style** when it comes to decision making. Simply put, some people have a harder time committing to a big decision than others do. **Is there something holding you back from making this decision?** If you are interested in receiving need assistance with your decision-making skills, consider tapping into the helpful resources at the **Engle Center**.

**What are key points to consider?**

- Consider how much **flexibility** you want to have in your major, especially if you are thinking about adding a minor which will take up more credit space.

- Some majors are heavier in **required number of major-related credits credit**, and therefore you are advised to declare them sooner rather than later (Social Work versus Human Development and Family Science, for example).

- **If you are considering an applied major** (such as Nursing, Education, or Engineering), you will also want to declare this sooner rather than later.

- Several majors have **built-in practical experiences**, and you will need to take the proper pre-requisite courses before you are able to begin these experiences. Discuss this with your advisor.

- Keep in mind that there are several **advantages to a liberal arts education**. In fact, employers often highly desire related skill sets more than a specific major.

**How do you go about declaring a major?**

- You can obtain a simple “**change of major**” form from the **Registrar’s Office** in Old Main. This form will require a signature from your current undeclared advisor as well as the department chair for the major you are declaring.

- **If you are considering a minor**, know that this is not something you need to declare until your sophomore or junior year. See the College Catalogue for more information.

**Reflection Q’s**

- **What are my hopes and fears about declaring a particular major?**

- **Do I understand the relationship, or, at times, lack thereof, between major and career?**

- **Do I realize the value of a liberal arts education?**

- **Am I excited and energized by the field of study I am**
Career development is a lifetime process. That said; consider your choice of major as your “first destination.” As a steward of your strengths, consider carefully what you have to contribute to your next step.

What steps can I take to make the most of my major?

- Create a first draft of your résumé; what gaps exist? Use this as a guide to start constructing an action plan that includes relevant, sought-after experience. Review with a Career Coach!
- Make an action plan for gaining experience: potential internships, fellowships, research opportunities, study abroad programs, student clubs and organizations, volunteering or service learning, a work study position, and summer or part-time work.
- Attend job and graduate school fairs and other career-related events throughout the year. Start early; remember, you don’t have to be in the job-seeking phase to attend!

With whom should I be connecting?

- Start expanding your network of personal and professional contacts. Communicate your goals and ideas about what might be next for you.

Take the initiative to build relationships with your academic advisor, faculty members, and RD. Discuss and gain ideas about potential career interests and plans to gain experience. Invest in faculty members with whom you share specific interests/passions. Consider seeking a mentor.

- Connect with professional associations and conferences in your field. Ask your faculty members for referrals.

- Build a professional web presence through vehicles such as social networking sites (ex. LinkedIn) and e-portfolios. Document your experiences in your electronic portfolio as a way of showcasing your skills and accomplishments.

- Stay on top of current events, trends, and hot topics in your field through journals, magazines, and the news.

Reflection Q’s

- What specific experiences are highly desirable in my targeted field?
- How am I practicing the skills that will make me a marketable candidate to future employer or graduate school?
- What will set me apart from the average candidate in my chosen field?
- Do I know what resources exist to help me excel in my chosen field, and have I utilized them to the best of my ability?