

Making a Career Choice

THE ROADS to the future are much easier to navigate when you do your homework first. The right pre-work can save you from getting lost and discouraged and can better ensure that you arrive at the career and future of your dreams.



Objectives:



1. Define the term *career*.
2. Develop a list of questions to assist in career decision making.
3. Develop decision-making skills related to career identification and selection.
4. Determine potential careers.
5. Select career paths and programs of study.

Key Terms:



aptitude	industry	<i>Occupational Outlook Handbook (OOH)</i>
career	interest	profession
cooperative education (co-op)	internship	Senior Project
field of study	job shadowing	skill
Individual Career Portfolio or Plan (ICP)	lifelong learning (LLL)	vocation
	lifestyle	

The Choice Is Yours

You and your best friend are planning a road trip to California over spring vacation. You have heard from friends and relatives that Los Angeles is the place to be in March. There are at least 10 different TV shows that confirm California beaches are the best. So you pack your swimsuit, driving snacks, and drinks, grab your cell phone charger and flip flops, and head for the car. You pick up your friend, gas the car, and then start driving west. After about an hour, you say to your friend, “So which highway is the best way? Have you checked the map?” Your friend responds, “Who needs a map? We’ll decide the next time we stop for gas.”

Huh? It doesn't take an expert to realize you and your friend are going to drive in circles, use a lot of gas, and waste a chunk of your spring vacation time and money going nowhere. Everyone knows that you need a map to navigate the roads of strange or complex lands. So why do so many students decide to "try out college or a career" without checking the map? There are surefire ways to make the road trip to your future fun, safe, and exciting.

WHAT IS A CAREER, ANYWAY?

A **career** is a profession or occupation that one chooses and for which one is prepared by education, training, and experience. It is your course or progress through life. A career reflects **lifelong learning (LLL)**, which is the continuous building of skills and knowledge throughout the life of an individual for personal and professional benefit. Learning becomes self-motivated, as opposed to education that is required or mandated. Your career is truly unique in that your individual experiences and training build and evolve and stop growing only when you decide not to learn anymore. Your career is always emerging.

A career is not:

- ◆ Your first job out of high school or college
- ◆ One course or program of study
- ◆ A college major

SIGNIFICANT QUESTIONS AS THEY RELATE TO CAREER DECISION MAKING

Everyone who has ever had to make career decisions has had to ask the same hard questions. There are no shortcuts to this process. The basic questions follow this line of thinking: "What are my interests, skills, and aptitudes?" "What do I want for myself?" "What are the realities of my career interests?" "Does the career fit me?" Let's look at these questions.

"What Are My Interests, Skills, and Aptitudes?"

An **interest** is something that draws the attention of an individual—something that may involve or concern the person. To discover your interests, consider your hobbies and how you choose to spend your time.

Considering your skill sets is important, too. A **skill** (an ability stemming from knowledge or practice) is easy to measure because it is often tangible. Your skills may be in the arts, sports, music, or some other area.

Your aptitudes are also worth considering. An **aptitude** is a special fitness or talent, whether innate or acquired. Some people have aptitudes for math or dance; others have aptitudes for work with small children or animals.

While bearing in mind your own unique makeup, think about your individual preferences (personal tastes). Consider your individual values (ideals, customs, ethics). Keep track of your preferences and values, as often the data can blur when so much is contemplated.

“What Do I Want for Myself?”

The next area to mull over is what you actually want for yourself in the future. It is important to consider what lifestyle you would like to have. A **lifestyle** is a set of individual behaviors that are uniquely comfortable, including social entertainment, consumption, and dress. List your wants, and attempt to quantify their value. Ask yourself:

- ◆ “Where do I want to live?” “What is the cost?”
- ◆ “What do I want to drive?” “What is the cost?”
- ◆ “What do I want to afford?” “What is the cost?”

In other words, “What salary will I need to maintain my chosen lifestyle?” Once you are ready to see the real numbers and do the real math, go to the following budget and salary websites, and enter data. Seeing how the numbers actually compute is a real eye-opener.

- ◆ <http://www.mappingyourfuture.org/money/budgetcalculator.htm>
- ◆ <http://us.thesalarycalculator.co.uk/hourly.php>

“What Are the Realities of My Career Interests?”

At this point in the career exploration process, you may have some ideas or initial career interests. Equally important as looking deeper into your personal makeup is researching the occupational outlook for your career interests. It is very easy to select a career based on superficial information or for meaningless reasons. Every year people choose careers based on fictional television shows that portray distorted impressions of careers and occupations. These same people become very disappointed when they discover what the careers are really about. Get the facts straight.

What does the *Occupational Outlook Handbook (OOH)* indicate? The **Occupational Outlook Handbook (OOH)** is a nationally recognized source of career information, including work, training, and education, designed to provide valuable assistance to individuals making decisions about their future work lives. It can be viewed online at <http://www.bls.gov/oco/>. Use this site to:

- ◆ Discover how the salary of your chosen career matches up with your lifestyle needs
- ◆ Research specifically what you like about this career
- ◆ Determine what the educational requirements are for your chosen career

Then ask yourself:

- “Can I commit to those academic requirements?”
 - “Am I on the right academic track?”
 - “What academic steps do I need to take now?”
- ◆ “Is the career legal?”

“Does the Career Fit Me?”

The final area to focus in on is fit. In other words, how do your “who” and “wants” match up with the “realities” and “requirements” of your career interests? This is where the rubber hits the road for career exploration. You may know your interests, skills, and aptitudes. You may know your career interests and their educational and training realities. However, if your willingness to commit to these requirements falls short, the fit will not work, and you will fail in your attempt at your chosen career. That is the hard truth. Or, perhaps your commitment to the requirements matches, but the salary realities do not match your lifestyle wants. This situation will also leave you disappointed. All the areas must be appropriate for the right fit.

There are some finer points to the career exploration process.

- ◆ It is important to keep in mind the difference between working in the field of study and working in the industry of interest. The **field of study** is the academic discipline. The **industry** is the aggregate of enterprises producing a good (either a material or a service) within an economy (such as hospitality, farming, technology, automotive, chemical, etc.). As an example, let’s say your interest is in the area of nursing. You are not limited to nursing in a healthcare setting. You may choose to be a school nurse, work for the Red Cross, or be a nursing instructor. You can combine your field of study with nearly any industry to further meet your interests. It is critical, however, to research both the field of study and the industry, as both are components of the career pathway.
- ◆ A vocation and a profession are not the same. A **vocation** is the work in which a person is employed. A **profession** is work requiring specialized knowledge and intensive academic preparation.
- ◆ Finally, family planning issues and influences should be considered as you set about choosing a career.



FIGURE 1. Does your career choice fit you?

DECISION-MAKING SKILLS RELATED TO CAREER IDENTIFICATION AND SELECTION

Once you determine a career interest, you can begin to practice and apply decision-making skills.

Firsthand Experiences Within the Field of Study or Career Cluster

Firsthand experiences will help in fine-tuning your interest and confirming your research. These experiences could include:

- ◆ Field trips

- ◆ **Job shadowing**—a career exploration activity that offers an opportunity to spend time with a professional currently working in a person’s career field of interest. It offers first-hand experience in a specific job. You have an opportunity to ask questions and meet a potential mentor.
- ◆ **Internship**—a system of on-the-job training typically for a white-collar profession, similar to an apprenticeship for a blue collar vocation. An internship provides an opportunity for you to gain experience in your field, determine whether you have an interest in a particular career, do some networking, and in some cases meet a school graduation requirement. An internship may be either paid or unpaid.
- ◆ Volunteer opportunities



DIGGING DEEPER...

UNCOVERING ADDITIONAL FACTS: Making a Career Choice

The purpose of this activity is to initiate the career exploration process. You will begin to determine your readiness to make a career choice. You will record your career exploration progress to date in your ICP (or Senior Project folder) and determine the next steps on your career choice continuum.

Begin by identifying your interests, skills, and aptitudes on a sheet of paper. If you are not sure of your interests or want to confirm them with an assessment instrument, go to Career Clusters Interest Survey at <http://www.careerclusters.org/resources/ccinterestsurvey/InterestSurvey.pdf>.

On another sheet of paper, describe what you want for yourself in terms of lifestyle and the salary requirements to support that lifestyle. Make sure to include all the basics, such as housing, transportation, utilities, and entertainment, along with the associated costs of those items. Then determine what type of salary you will need to support that lifestyle. The following websites will be helpful for these calculations: <http://www.mappingyourfuture.org/money/budgetcalculator.htm> and <http://us.thesalarycalculator.co.uk/hourly.php>.

On a third sheet of paper, summarize what the *OOH* indicates about your preliminary career interest. Describe the commitment you will need to make now and in the future to achieve the requirements of your career.

On a fourth sheet of paper, describe how your career choice fits you. Make sure to emphasize things about the career that fit you particularly well. Then list and describe which type of firsthand (in-the-field) experiences you have that confirm your interests. If you have not had any, talk with your teachers and counselors about scheduling some. What firsthand experiences would you like to structure in the near future?

Finally, on a fifth sheet of paper, describe your plans to further research your career choice. Describe how you can use postsecondary educational options as a way to confirm your career interests. Take time to carefully describe the reality checks you have put in place to correct your visions of reality surrounding this career choice.

- ◆ **Cooperative education (co-op)**—a structured method of combining classroom-based education with practical work experience. “Co-op” provides academic credit for job experience.
- ◆ Work experience (in or out of school)

All these options allow you to experiment safely with a career choice.

Other Resources for Decision Making

The amount of information related to careers and career exploration is almost unlimited. You can complete additional field research by using the following resources:

- ◆ Libraries (school and public)
- ◆ The Internet
- ◆ Informational interviews (family, relatives, friends)

Postsecondary Educational Research

Postsecondary educational providers can be a great source for career information. They can assist with:

- ◆ College research
- ◆ College visitations
- ◆ Job and career fairs
- ◆ Alumni networks
- ◆ Industry leader visits

DETERMINE POTENTIAL CAREERS

Once you have assessed your interests, determined your lifestyle needs, and looked into some careers and their requirements, you need to analyze your data. The bottom line, after all, is to discover what potential careers would be best for you.

Reality Checks and Assessment of Data

Putting the pieces together can be overwhelming, but it does not need to be. Keep in mind that you are looking for a good place to start, not selecting the



FIGURE 2. The right career choice will fit comfortably and will allow you to perform at your best.

one and only job you will have for the rest of your life. Review the career cluster assessments and career pathway descriptions at <http://www.careerclusters.org>.

Remember to reduce risks; college is too expensive to use as a career exploration tool. It is important to know what you may want to do as a career before you start postsecondary education. Give yourself freedom to evolve; acknowledge that the first step is just the jumping-off point. Get feedback from those who know you best (counselors, teachers, and family).

RECORD CAREER PATHS AND PROGRAMS OF STUDY

As you are determining your chosen career cluster, career pathway, and program of study, it is important to record your decisions. Your records should reflect the evolution of your decision-making process. There are at least two different ways to record your search results.

Individual Career Portfolio or Plan (ICP)

The **Individual Career Portfolio or Plan (ICP)** is a device to help middle and high school students track their progress in academic performance and career planning. Its basis is the 16 career clusters identified by the U.S. Department of Education. It is usually a folder or file that holds important documents and provides a place to record relevant information. The ICP typically includes material related to career interests, assessment results, employability skills, extracurricular activities, honors and awards, postsecondary educational plans and research, and job and career research.

Senior Project

The **Senior Project** is a culminating high school activity that hinges on a student's interests and future plans. The project usually includes four major parts: research, process, product, and exhibition of the project results to a panel of experts. Smaller educational communities may opt to use the Senior Project in place of the ICP. It is an excellent way to demonstrate the hard work you have invested in your future.

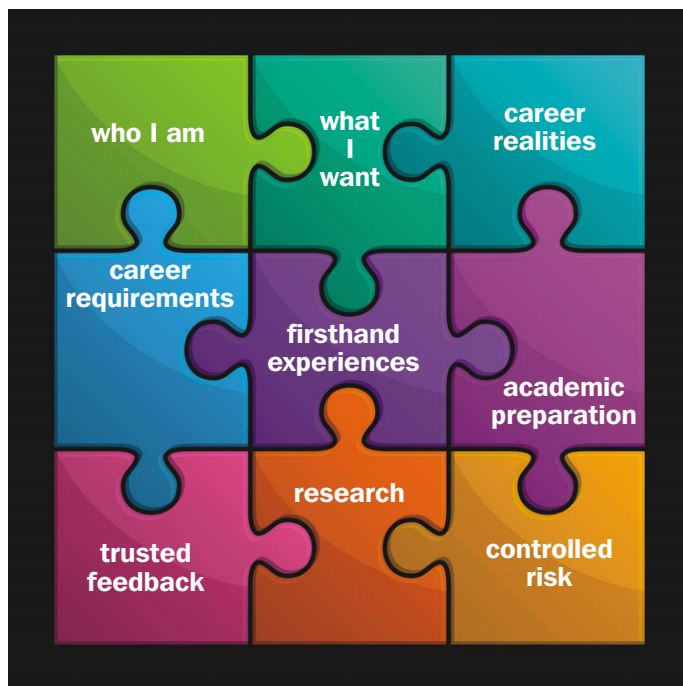


FIGURE 3. Analyze the data, and make sure all the pieces fit together.

Summary:



A career is a profession or occupation that one chooses and for which one is prepared by education, training and experience. It is your course or progress through life. A career reflects lifelong learning (LLL). Everyone who has ever had to make career decisions has had to ask the same hard questions: “What are my interests, skills, and aptitudes?” “What do I want for myself?” “What are the realities of my career interests?” “Does the career fit me?”

Once you determine a career interest, you can begin to practice and apply decision-making skills. Firsthand experiences will help in fine-tuning your interest and confirming your research. These experiences could include field trips, job shadowing, an internship, volunteer opportunities, cooperative education (co-op), and work experience (in or out of school). All these options allow you to experiment safely with a career choice.

Once you have assessed your interests, determined your lifestyle needs, and looked into some careers and their requirements, you need to analyze your data. The bottom line, after all, is to discover what potential careers would be best for you. Keep in mind that you are looking for a good place to start, not selecting the one and only job you will have for the rest of your life.

Review the career cluster assessments and career pathway descriptions at <http://www.careerclusters.org>. As you are determining your chosen career cluster, career pathway, and program of study, it is important to record your decisions. Your records should reflect the evolution of your decision-making process. There are at least two different ways to record your search results: the ICP and the Senior Project folder.

Checking Your Knowledge:



1. List and describe six of the nine features of a career choice that must fit together for the career to be an acceptable choice.
2. What firsthand career experiences can you use to help confirm your career interests?
3. What is the *OOH*, and how is it used?
4. How is your career connected to your lifestyle expectations?
5. Why is it important to record your career exploration progress in an ICP or Senior Project folder?

Expanding Your Knowledge:



Visit your local community college career center, and do some additional research on your career interests. Ask about interest surveys the center may have available and other career resources.

Web Links:



Twenty Questions to Ask Your Counselor

<http://www.collegeboard.com/student/plan/starting-points/114.html>

Career and College Planning Resources

<http://www.khake.com/page51.html>

Career Exploration Tools

<http://online.onetcenter.org/>

CareerOneStop

<http://www.acinet.org/acinet>

National Sample Definitions

<http://www.careerclusters.org/definitions.php>

Career Click

<http://www.workforceinfo.state.il.us/>

Career Guide to Industries (CGI)

<http://www.bls.gov/oco/cg/>

ProQuest K-12

<http://www.proquestk12.com/curr/homework/students.shtml>