

Help Your Child Use Decision Skills to Select a College Major



Our decisions are the single most consequential way that we can improve (or undermine) our own lives. For example, selecting a college major is one decision that can be an especially stressful experience for adolescents and the family members who support them because it can have lifechanging consequences. This handout can help you work with your child on a thoughtful approach to choosing a college major so that their future is more likely to unfold in ways they prefer.

Recognizing the Need to Make a Decision

We're more likely to recognize the need to make a decision when we're aware of what distinguishes different types of choices from one another and learn skills that can help us manage them. Choosing a college major is a **deliberative decision** that can have lifechanging effects, so it's wise to spend a significant amount of time analyzing the situation.

Decision Type	Description	Typical Characteristics
In-the-Moment Choice	Usually requires self-regulation and a quick imagining of consequences to take an action that has a positive outcome	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Occurs frequently Compressed timeline May make us feel under pressure to "think fast" Easy to make mistakes that leave you wondering "What was I thinking?" Careless mistakes may result if you're operating on "autopilot" Easy to observe others in the heat of the moment and believe you would have done things differently
Conscious Habit Formation	Requires one to identify a routine to automatically trigger a behavior that will have lasting benefits if performed regularly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Affects everyday life May be prompted by a sense of frustration with one's behavior, noticing that a goal has been difficult to achieve, or a desire to "turn over a new leaf" May require disrupting old behaviors that have operated on autopilot
Deliberative Decision	Usually has a major impact on one's lifestyle and requires a detailed process that includes defining one's objectives, identifying alternatives, gathering information, and making predictions about alternatives before taking action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Arises occasionally Long-lasting impact Stakes might feel high, like a "make or break" situation or a turning point Might make a decision maker feel torn if each alternative has a mix of benefits and drawbacks Might be considered over at least a few days

Following a Skillful Decision Making Process

Uncertainty abounds when adolescents consider their college major. They may wonder: what outcomes could result from pursuing a certain degree program? What will the job market be like a few years from now? What kind of lifestyle will I want when I'm a working adult? Vague visions of the future can lead adolescents to make decisions based on emotional reactions and guesses (sometimes stemming from family members' anecdotal advice) instead of well-reasoned predictions. Working through these main steps can help us think more rationally throughout any decision making process. The amount of effort we put into considering them will vary depending on the significance of the decision and our time constraints. For a decision like selecting a college major, we have the opportunity to work through each step carefully, and it's worth it.

Steps to Consider in a Decision Making Process

Generate Alternatives	Gather Information & Update Beliefs	Predict Outcomes	Take Action, Then Reflect
Consider a wide range of options if possible before you narrow your focus.	Improve your understanding about the alternatives and calibrate your beliefs about the current state of the situation as you work to resolve uncertainty.	Estimate values and likelihoods for the consequences that might happen if you chose each alternative.	Choose an alternative and follow through. Later, reflect on the quality of your decision making process.

Influences on Thinking to Monitor

While we consider the steps in a decision making process, we should observe the factors that influence our thinking, including but not limited to:

Personal States and Traits

Emotional state
Risk tolerance
Personal values

Personal finances

Persuasion from Other People
Family values
Peer pressure
Advertisements and sales pitches

Other Circumstances

Access to resources and information
Geography
Economic climate

Three Decision Skills to Try

Carefully working through each step of a decision making process involves applying decision skills that calibrate our perspectives and push us to think more rationally. Encourage your child to try these three skills from Decision Education when they're considering college majors.

Vanishing Options Test



When we're generating alternatives, the Vanishing Options Test from *Decisive* by Chip and Dan Heath can push us to make sure we're not overly committed to a favorite option at the expense of overlooking or undervaluing other worthy contenders. Here's how to do the Vanishing Options Test while considering college majors:

1. Identify the college major that's the frontrunner in your mind right now.
 2. Imagine that major no longer exists.
 3. Now what are you going to do? Identify the major you think you'd pursue instead.
- Repeat steps 1-3 a few times until you have a list of majors worth considering seriously. Try to give equal attention to explaining your reasoning before you get emotionally invested in one of them.

Weight & Rate Method

The Weight & Rate Method helps us reflect on our goals and values, determine the alternatives available to us, and imagine the consequences of choosing those alternatives.

1. At the top of the table, write four criteria you want your college major to satisfy. Examples could include:

Will promote financial stability	Related to my talents/abilities	Classes will be interesting to me	Could lead to multiple careers
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2. **Weight:** Distribute 20 points amongst those criteria according to how much you value them.
3. **Rate:** Write 3 majors you're considering on the left side of the table. For each major, rate out of 5 how well it meets each criteria.
4. **Calculate:** Multiply the numbers you assigned to each criteria's weight by the criteria's rating.
5. **Evaluate:** Although you should think more in-depth about the details and try to learn more about college majors at different schools and expectations for the job market, these numbers provide one way of understanding which alternative may suit you best. Consider doing this exercise again as you learn more about each major.

Note: You can add or subtract majors or criteria as you see fit. Take the total number of points you're distributing for your weighting and add 5 points for any other criteria you include and subtract 5 points for each criteria you remove.

	Criteria: _____ Weight (W): ____	Criteria: _____ Weight (W): ____	Criteria: _____ Weight (W): ____	Criteria: _____ Weight (W): ____	(Weights must add up to 20)
Major: _____	Rating (R): ____/5 W x R = ____	Rating (R): ____/5 W x R = ____	Rating (R): ____/5 W x R = ____	Rating (R): ____/5 W x R = ____	Total: ____
Major: _____	Rating (R): ____/5 W x R = ____	Rating (R): ____/5 W x R = ____	Rating (R): ____/5 W x R = ____	Rating (R): ____/5 W x R = ____	Total: ____
Major: _____	Rating (R): ____/5 W x R = ____	Rating (R): ____/5 W x R = ____	Rating (R): ____/5 W x R = ____	Rating (R): ____/5 W x R = ____	Total: ____

Conduct a Premortem

A premortem is a strategy from the business world that involves imagining a project has failed and identifying the factors that led to the failure. Immersing yourself in this hypothetical situation can encourage you to address risks and pitfalls. Before you settle on a college major, follow these steps to conduct a premortem for each one you're considering:

1. Imagine this version of the future: you graduated from college with a degree in _____, but one year later you're unhappy with your career status.
2. Work backward and ask yourself what issues contributed to your unhappiness.
3. Come back to the present: ask yourself how likely you think the issues you identified are to actually occur. If you chose this major, would there be anything you could do during college to prevent them (like working on projects in the department, completing a summer internship, or attending job fairs)? Are the issues troublesome enough that you're convinced you shouldn't pursue that major or are you comfortable with the risks it may present?



To access additional resources that can help you build your decision skills and learn more about Decision Education, visit allianceforddecisioneducation.org and follow the Alliance on social media.

