

How to Discuss Major and Career Choices

By Terese Corey Blanck and Peter Vogt

In their bestselling book [Now, Discover Your Strengths](#) (Free Press, 2001), Gallup Organization researchers Marcus Buckingham and Donald Clifton cite 30 years' worth of Gallup research - involving almost two million participants - that points to a key conclusion about people and careers: To excel in your chosen field and to find lasting satisfaction in doing so, you will need to understand your unique patterns. You will need to become an expert at finding and describing and applying and practicing and refining your strengths. This task is difficult enough when you're considering yourself and your own life. It can be even tougher for you if you're the parent of a high school or college student and you're trying to help your son/daughter identify and apply his/her unique strengths in selecting a college major, for example, or determining a career path after graduation. Fortunately, there are many things you can do to become a thought-provoking, inspiring resource for your young adult as he/she embarks on this critical journey:

Set the Stage for Authentic Dialogue Clear your thoughts about what you might want for your son/daughter in the way of a college major or career, and instead be fully present to listen to the path(s) he/she is contemplating. Give your son/daughter express permission to talk with you about his/her career-related thoughts and dreams. And let your child know his/her exploration and decision-making process will take some time.

Help Your Son/Daughter Pinpoint Natural Strengths and Abilities You've known your son/daughter for many years now. Share your observations of what his/her innate talents or gifts seem to be, and encourage him/her to ask close friends for their observations as well. You'd be amazed by the number of people - especially young adults - who feel they have no strengths because what they're good at comes so easily to them that (in their minds) none of it can possibly be "real" talents! Help your son/daughter see - and acknowledge - the strengths they may not recognize in themselves.

Teach Your Son/Daughter How to Identify Interests and Passions It's one thing to be good at something; it's another thing entirely to enjoy that something. Many a young person has been steered in a major or career direction that made sense with his/her abilities but not his/her interests. The result is often disappointment ... or worse. As a parent, you can do your son/daughter a great service by helping him/her identify what he/she really enjoys. What does your son seem to focus on almost naturally? What grabs your daughter's attention the most? Conversely, what activities does your son/daughter absolutely hate?!

Encourage Your Son/Daughter to Test Ideas You've been in the world a lot longer than your son/daughter has, so you've developed relationships you can tap to help your son/daughter test academic and career ideas. If your neighbor, for example, sells insurance and your daughter has expressed interest in a finance-related career, encourage her to talk to your neighbor for initial ideas on the types of finance careers that exist in the world of insurance. If your second cousin - who lives hundreds of miles away - is a veterinarian and your son thinks he might want to major in zoology at college, suggest that your son email your cousin and ask her some questions about veterinarians and others who work with animals for a living.

Point Out Resources Your Son/Daughter Can Tap for Academic and Career Planning Many, if not most, high schools and colleges employ guidance counselors and career development professionals who are paid - through your tax dollars and perhaps even your private tuition dollars as well - to help students with academic and career planning issues. Encourage your son/daughter to explore the often overlooked resources available at his/her school's guidance office, career center, or counseling or advising center.

Help Your Son/Daughter Keep Academic and Career Decisions in Perspective Too often, young people treat choosing a major or selecting an initial career path as though it were a life-and-death decision. But of course it's not. Help your child keep that in mind. The path your son/daughter will take on the road to his/her educational and career goals will be winding, not straight.

Be Willing to Say, "I Don't Know" Every day, somewhere in this country, a high school or college student says to a career counselor, "I'd like to major in art, but I can't because I'll never get a job with that degree." What a tragedy - and it often unfolds because a well-meaning but less-than-knowledgeable parent has told his/her child, "You'll never get a job with an art degree." Where does that kind of (mis)information come from? Often, it's something a parent has only vaguely "heard about" or "read somewhere" - and it isn't even remotely accurate. So when your son/daughter comes to you with an idea for a college major or career, be very careful of sharing with him/her what you (think you) know about that possibility. Challenge your own assumptions and perceptions about various educational and career paths, and teach your son/daughter to do the same. True, there may not be as many jobs in the world of art as there are in, say, accounting; but there are some jobs out there - and one of them may have your child's name on it.

For more assistance with your job or internship search, set up an appointment with a Career Services advisor. To make an appointment, call 507.457.5878