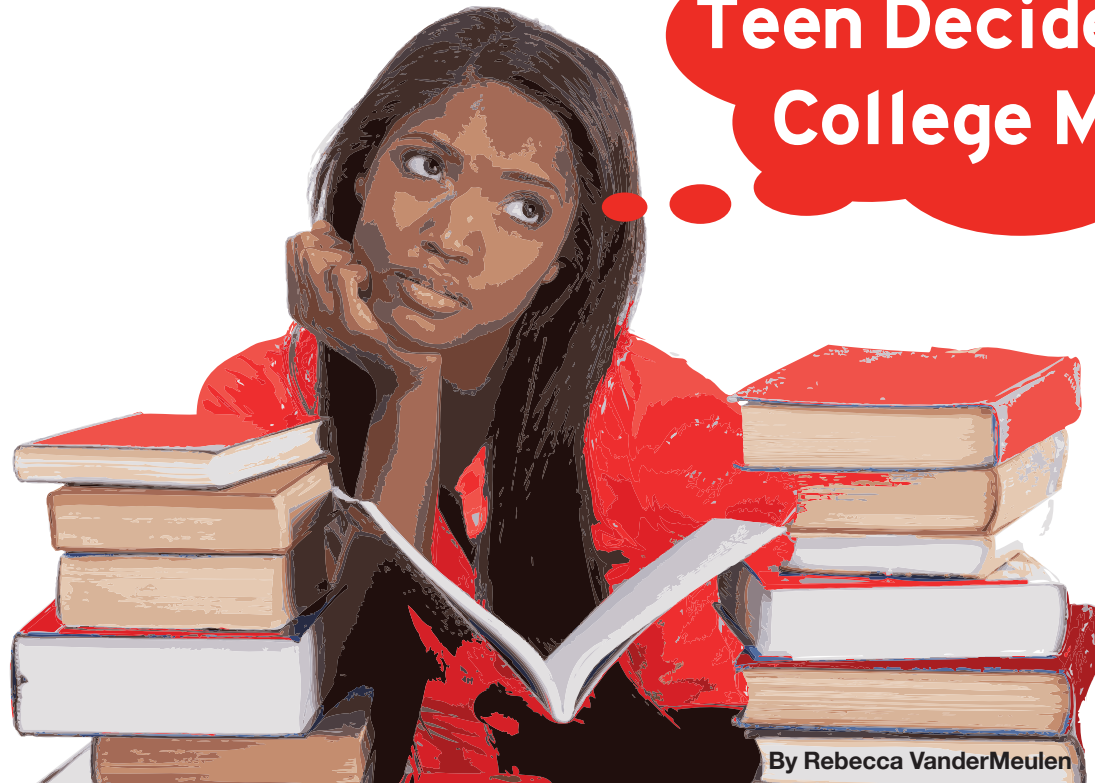


Helping Your Teen Decide Their College Major



By Rebecca VanderMeulen

No teen planning ahead for college can escape the query **“What are you going to major in?”** The answer will seemingly reveal a student’s ultimate career path, as well as the school for which she is destined.

Picking a college major is an important decision—and one many students end up making in the wrong way. When teens choose their majors they’re often influenced by parents, friends, gut feelings, and TV shows, not their own goals and interests. Figures from the U.S. Department of Education show that among students who began college in the 2003–04 school year, 35 percent of those who earned bachelor’s degrees had within six years changed their majors at least once. Twenty-two percent of those who received associate’s degrees had also switched. Changing majors makes it harder for students to finish on time, especially if they’re closer to graduation than orientation at the time of the switch.

“If you get this wrong, you could be out hundreds of thousands of dollars and years of your life,” cautions Bill Bly, an associate with Clear Life Plan, which helps students select colleges, majors, and professions.

Still, the first question your teen should ask himself isn’t “What should my major be?” Students need to first figure out their strengths, personality

traits, values, and goals. Once those questions are answered, the decisions of where to go to college and what to study become much easier.

The Center for Calling and Career at Lee University in Cleveland, Tennessee, is guided by Ephesians 2:10: “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” Center Director Stacy D. Ballinger states that the key is for students to discern their God-given gifts and where the Lord is leading them.

Here are some points to contemplate:

- * What, specifically, does your teen enjoy doing and why? “If you went on a mission trip to Mexico, what was it that you did that was meaningful to you?” asks Juliet Wehr Jones, vice president of the Career Key. Was the most rewarding aspect raising money for the trip, organizing service projects, or connecting directly with local people?
- * Ask your teen to consider their accomplishments, both at school and outside of school. What talents did your teen use to achieve a goal? Jones points out that this kind of assessment helps students identify skills and aptitudes like writing, problem-solving, and creativity.
- * Ask your teen to record two or three goals for her future, Ballinger suggests. Then have

Lisa F. Young

her write down why these goals are important, obstacles that stand in her way, and a list of people who could help her reach these goals.

- * Encourage your student to consider what working environment suits him best. Bly notes, for example, that those who spend a lot of time making decisions should avoid jobs with lots of deadlines.
- * Go to a career counselor who works with young people, or give your teen tests that gauge his skills and interests. This might cost money, but chances are it will be less expensive in the long run than paying for extra years in school once your child switches courses of study. There are several different kinds of assessments, so pick one backed by scientific research. Good assessments allow people to come to their own conclusions about the results.
- * Ballinger points out that students often identify what they want to do more easily than they can pick a major. So ask your teen to think about her goals. A desire to work with animals, for example, points to certain careers and majors. “If you can’t tell me what you want to study, tell me what you want to do,” she invites.
- * If a certain job appeals to your teen, encourage him to spend a day with someone in



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that field. It’s best to shadow this person and conduct an informational interview to see what that job is really like.

- * Urge your teen to talk about careers and majors with you, friends, and other adults in the know, such as youth-group leaders and guidance counselors. It helps to take notes—with a pen and paper.
- * Consider whether your teen’s career goals are pointing toward a four-year university, a graduate degree, a two-year college, or a trade school.
- * When you visit colleges, talk to career-center representatives. Ask where students with certain kinds of majors typically end up, as well as what percentage either get hired or go on to graduate school.

Although it’s helpful for students to have some idea of what they want to study before starting college, they don’t have to pick a major right away. Ballinger suggests that it’s best to pick a school that’s a good personal fit and then to get involved in activities within a month of arriving on campus. The choice of a major will come quickly enough. “I think all freshmen could stay undecided their first year, and it wouldn’t matter,” she reflects.

Rebecca VanderMeulen is a freelance journalist in Downingtown, Pennsylvania. She is active in her church and often writes about higher education.