

What's your major, and why?

On the difference between guessing a career and trying one

THE CHALLENGE

Students are asked to name a major or field of study before there is evidence of how they respond to professional work — and the first answer now carries more weight than it used to.

THE INSIGHT

A student cannot try every career. They can try the work that careers are made of. Thirty core activities in nine workstyles account for the core emphasis of 400+ occupations.

THE APPROACH

Across nine sessions with a career expert, a student performs all thirty activities and records what pulled them in and what drained them. Using that, we can identify the majors and careers that hold more of their interests. The direction that follows rests on what they did, not on what they guessed.

Early decisions without early answers

“That’s cool, but I have no idea if I’d like that.” A rising senior said that on a campus visit, holding a pamphlet listing the majors.

In July 2026 we reviewed the published application requirements of 150 top national universities. The large majority asked for a major, a school, or a direction. The essay asking why this major gets written by students who have never done the work.

Once in college, they revise. Of one national cohort who finished a bachelor’s degree, nearly half changed their primary major along the way. That is not a failure of the students or of the people advising them. It is what happens when students choose a field before trying the work. Years later, more of them would change what they studied than where they studied.

What has changed is the cost of revising. At most of the 150, moving into sought-after majors now depends on the grades earned in the first one. In the fastest-recruiting fields, internship applications open as early as sophomore year.

The first choice is not binding, but it is load-bearing: it sets which courses come first and which faculty see a student’s work more than once. A student with a direction starts that sequence in September of freshman year. A student who guessed starts it after a switch.

The major is not the destination. It is the runway.

When discovery starts after enrollment, it runs on the college clock and at college prices. The goal is not certainty at seventeen, but a direction informed by experience.

82%

of 150 top national universities ask for a major, a school, or a direction on the application form.

Review of published requirements, July 2026

47%

of graduates in one national cohort changed their primary major before finishing.

American Academy of Arts & Sciences, Humanities Indicators, 2025

35%

of adults who continued past high school would now choose a different field of study, larger than those who would choose a different school.

Federal Reserve, Survey of Household Economics and Decisionmaking, 2023

81%

of the same 150 gate entry to at least some majors on first-year grades.

Review of published requirements, July 2026

Students can learn about work. They can't try it.

Counseling departments ask the right questions with the tools that exist. Interest inventories record what a student says they are drawn to. Aptitude batteries measure what they are good at. Career talks, videos, and job shadows show what the work looks like from a chair nearby. Each of these answers a real question, and schools use them for good reasons.

Line them up and they stop at the same place. None of them can show how this particular student responds when the work is in their hands — where they lean in, where they stall, what they would volunteer to do again tomorrow.

That evidence exists only after the work, which is the difficulty. A student cannot apprentice into one career after another to collect it, and no student can work through hundreds of them. Getting it in time requires a unit smaller than a career.

The unit smaller than a career is an activity

There are too many careers to try. Underneath them is a smaller set of recurring activities.

Take design. Ask what a designer does and the list sprawls: sketches, software, clients, materials, meetings, expense reports. Ask what kind of designer and it sprawls again — interiors, products, websites, games, exhibits. But much of the work comes back to a few recurring activities: gather user needs, prioritize features and design a solution, get feedback and adjust. A student can work through those against a real brief, and learn from the experience.

We identified thirty core activities and grouped them into nine workstyles, which are broader families of professional work such as research, create, and sell. The workstyles organize the activities; they are not personality types or boxes students get sorted into.

Students complete one one-hour session for each workstyle. Across nine sessions, they try all thirty activities. A career expert introduces the brief and guides the experience. The student begins independently, then meets with the expert for the parts that require another person. In a design session, for example, the expert may play the user: reacting to the student's solution and requiring the student to adapt. That interaction is part of the work itself, not something a description can reproduce.

After each session, the student records which activities energized them, which they could tolerate, and which drained them. The

EXHIBIT 1

What's missing?

LEARN

Interest inventories, aptitude batteries, career talks, videos, job shadows.

TRY

no way to do the work

DECLARE A MAJOR
on the college application

EDUCATE

Coursework, labs, and seminars in the declared major.

DEEPEN

Internships and research in the chosen field, junior year and after.

EXHIBIT 2

What students try

Thirty core activities within nine workstyles

RESEARCH

Read technical or scientific content
Design an approach and collect evidence
Analyze complex data and information
Share recommendation with evidence

CREATE

Gather user needs
Prioritize features and design a solution
Get feedback and adjust
Create a message that sparks interest

PERFORM

Understand how a system works
Follow a precise process
Troubleshoot problems

SELL

Learn product details
Find the right customers to target
Make a persuasive case to an audience

judgment is based on work they have just done, not on whether a career sounded interesting beforehand.

Careers can then be understood as different combinations of the thirty. A graphic designer's day is made largely of those three. A design director adds planning and coordination. A software developer combines activities from several workstyles: defining what to build, building it, and diagnosing what went wrong. Careers differ not just in which activities they contain, but in the mix. That is why a student is matched to careers at the activity level, rather than by assigning a student to one workstyle.

We mapped the thirty activities against more than 400 professional occupations in O*NET. In nearly all of them, a relatively small set captured the central emphasis of the occupation. The thirty activities and the nine-workstyle grouping are ours; the list is shown so readers can compare it with occupations they know.

So the useful result is not one workstyle a student is told they belong in. It is a profile across the thirty activities: where a student consistently leans in, where they pull back, and what combinations fit them best.

No student can try four hundred careers. They can try the thirty core activities that sit underneath them.

What the student walks away with

Using work samples as evidence is not a new idea. In adult hiring, employers have done it for decades because watching someone perform relevant tasks provides evidence that a questionnaire alone cannot. It is why consulting firms use case interviews and many technical roles use coding exercises. When the decision matters, employers often want to see someone do the work. A student choosing a major deserves that kind of evidence too.

The sessions are one-to-one for a reason. In a group, what a student says about the work is partly shaped by what others said first, and at seventeen the pull toward a friend's answer can be strong. Alone with the brief, the reaction is their own. The expert's presence also makes the work more consequential: when a student knows a practitioner will see and respond to the result, the brief feels less like an exercise and more like work.

None of this replaces what schools already do. It makes the rest of career exploration more useful. A student who discovers they lose themselves in troubleshooting walks into a job shadow with a different question — not “what is this office like?” but “how much of this job is troubleshooting, and can you show me some?” The same is true of a college visit, a conversation with a counselor, or a summer job. Exploration works better when the student knows

UNDERWRITE

- Model the key drivers and optimize
- Manage risks & trade-offs
- Negotiate deal terms

LEAD

- Select candidates for roles
- Coordinate planning
- Inspire people
- Resolve conflicts and align people

CARE

- Diagnose or assess human needs
- Create and justify a care plan
- Share with empathy

TEACH

- Learn a concept
- Create teaching aids
- Adapt explanation and teach

ENGAGE AI

- Direct AI
- Check AI outputs
- Make the final call

EXHIBIT 3

What one student found

Ranked from most energized to most drained

WHERE THEY STARTED

Good at math and science, comfortable with computers. No major picked, and no reason to prefer one technical path over another.

Perform Highly energized

“I like troubleshooting. Honestly, I’ll say I loved it. I’m deeply drawn to that.”

Underwrite Moderately energized

“You can really figure out, just simply with math, what is the most important thing to build on.”

Create Moderately energized

“Lots of creativity and unique designing.”

Lead Mildly energized

“Thinking about what comes first, organizing my own plan.”

Care Neutral

“I would want to help someone, but I wouldn’t want to be the person with that role.”

what they are looking for.

The student leaves with a record of what happened when they actually did the work: which activities energized them, which drained them, and which majors and career paths contain more of the first kind. It is not a label or a report telling them who they are. It is evidence they can use.

The activities that energized or drained the student create a rank order of careers by fit. Because the thirty activities are mapped against more than 400 occupations, the student can see which careers align most closely with their profile. The student's own priorities — what it pays, whether demand is growing, how much education it takes — then narrow the list. A student who lights up at troubleshooting might see many careers built around it, then narrow them to bright-outlook careers requiring no more than a bachelor's degree.

The question a student cannot answer at seventeen is which career is right. The question they can answer, having done the work, is which of it they would do again.

What to do with this

Parents — turn past experience into evidence.

Look back at projects, jobs, teams, and responsibilities. Which parts pulled your child in? Which did they avoid? Then look for the kinds of work they still have not tried. Start with the work, not the career.

Educators — put “try” before “choose.”

Look at the sequence students move through before declaring a direction. Where do they actually perform the work? Without that step, they are choosing from descriptions of careers rather than experience with the work itself.

Independent consultants — add work evidence before the application is built.

Use grades, interests, goals, and family considerations as you already do. Then ask what the student has actually tried. If that evidence is missing, help them get it before the major and college list harden around an assumption.

Sell Mildly drained

“Constantly trying to go from a new angle. Okay, what do I say now? And I was like, I don’t know.”

Research Moderately drained

“A lot of reading and understanding and interpreting. I zoned out.”

Teach Moderately drained

“I don’t really love my success being based off of other people.”

Engage AI Not scored

“The moment that felt most like me was auditing the AI, finding the flaws.”

WHERE IT LED

Computer engineering, with quantitative and financial work as a second direction. Energized by systems, precision and quantitative judgment; drained by open-ended research and subjective ambiguity.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I chose computer science at seventeen because I was good at math and was told it paid. In my first month on the job, I learned the work wasn't what I'd imagined. It took five years — graduate school, then a change of direction — to find work that fit, and to learn that a title tells you far less than the work behind it.

Two jobs drove that home: designing a national job-matching system as a Principal at The Boston Consulting Group, and coaching university students at Braven. When my son reached high school, I built DecadeAhead so that he could start from evidence rather than a guess: try different kinds of work, notice what pulls you in, then find the careers and majors that hold more of it.

Aravind Elango, Founder, DecadeAhead

Former Principal at The Boston Consulting Group and Head of Strategy at Vanguard • NCDA Certified Career Services Provider

DecadeAhead is a paid program