

Major in Success Chapter One and Two

Start early. Explore options. Listen to your gut.

By Cindy Valliere

Chapter One

As the mother of a 16 year-old son (who will be off to college in less than two years), I ask myself, "What will he be like when he's in his 20s and 30s? Will he be happy? Will he be ready for life?"

I'd like to talk about real-life situations that young people face today – their challenges and concerns as they search for their place in the world.

Mel Levine in his book, *Ready or Not, Here Life Comes*, believes our society is experiencing an epidemic of career unreadiness, as too few young people prepare themselves to lead productive lives. Last school year I had the privilege of working with several high school seniors on the topic of leadership. All were at the top of their graduating class and several had earned impressive scholarships. When I asked what they were going to major in, most said, "I haven't a clue!"

As parents, educators, and life coaches – how can we help young people get off to a great start?

By encouraging them to 'do their homework' when choosing a college major. They need to *start early, explore* as much as possible, and – bottom line – *listen to their gut!*

And it's not only about declaring an area of study – it's about selecting the *right* area of study, one that fuels a passion! Lisa, one of my coaching clients, should be graduating next year with a degree in Psychology. She had chosen psychology, mainly because her parents had felt this major would provide a good income. Now, though, Lisa has reconsidered. After some targeted assessments and exploration, she's now looking in other directions – communication and art – areas that come naturally to her and where her passions truly lie. Yes, her startup-in-life may be delayed, but now, at least she feels she is aiming at the right target.

The message? Look for a major and career area that YOU genuinely find interesting and that excites YOU (not your parents, teachers or school counselors).

Chapter Two

In this chapter, I'll elaborate on Lisa's story, since her struggles and challenges are very typical of young people today. Perhaps you'll relate to her story, which is really my goal – to help young people realize that their issues are *real* and *shared by others*, in addition to offering concrete ideas they may not have thought of before.

The previous chapter was about Lisa and how she chose her college major. Now, let's take a closer look at her decision-making process. Lisa made her decision for two reasons: 1) her parents felt this degree would provide a good income and 2) Lisa had seen a counselor when she was young and really liked her, had a good experience, and thought, "This might be something I'd like to do."

Lisa had always been very passionate about the arts, yet both she and her parents felt this career path was too risky. Psychology was more of a safe bet. These reasons seemed to make sense at the time. However, Lisa had overlooked a very important point. She hadn't researched and investigated the field of psychology – she hadn't posed the *real question*: "What will I do with a degree in psychology when I graduate?" That's the first question I asked when we started working together and her answer was, "I don't know".

Lisa needed to address this question. I suggested that she read the book, *What Can I do With a Major in Psychology?* by Horowitz and Walker. It provides an in-depth overview of typical jobs in the field along with salary levels, hours, work environments and profiles of real graduates, their jobs, and how they got them. What did Lisa learn from all of this? That none of these things interested her. She found no excitement in any of them.

Lisa found that many of the required classes were difficult for her, such as research and statistics. Getting through them was a real struggle. (This was not a surprise, judging from her ability, personality and interest profiles.) We also talked about how much she was influenced by other people's opinions of what was best for her – what they thought *she should do*. (Parents, friends, relatives mean well, but I don't think they realize how they can influence and perhaps pressure young people into making the wrong choices.) Lisa was now beginning to understand why she doubted her area of study; things were beginning to make sense to her. It became clear she'd chosen the wrong major.

Lisa will graduate in 2006 with a degree in psychology. She'll walk across the stage, receive her diploma, throw her graduation hat into the air, and NOT go into the field where she's degreed. That's the bad news. However, the good news is that we're developing an action plan based on *who Lisa really is*.

In wrapping up this chapter, let's look at a few things that Lisa discovered about herself. What did the assessment and questionnaire process reveal?

- Lisa likes a fast pace environment, is quick to learn, and writes well. These are all attributes conducive to a career in communications, perhaps as an account executive in advertising or PR. (Her degree could be an asset here, since psychology plays a key role in marketing and advertising. I could easily picture Lisa in New York, Chicago, or California with a top ad agency.)

- She has a passion for aesthetics and is well suited for working in high-end environments, such as selling expensive foreign cars, high-end jewelry or luxury custom homes. Indeed, she could probably sell ice to an Eskimo.
- She has an entrepreneurial profile and may want to own her own business. Cooking, beauty, and fashion, or some combination of these, are possibilities she may consider. In fact, I suggested she read *The Pampered Chef* by its founder, Doris Christopher.
- She's a natural performer and needs to select a field that will allow her to express herself. Lisa is great with people and adept at making others feel comfortable. She would be great at 'directing the show' and is a natural actress.

My experience tells me that Lisa's lack of direction is more the rule than the exception. So many young people start college with no plan. Their abilities, personality preferences, interests, values, passion, or life interests are vague and uncertain. They don't yet know who they are.

Lisa gave me many clues when I started asking about what she loved to do when she was young and her mom was also an invaluable source of information. I know there are successful people that had no plan of action and they have great lives. Sure, it's possible, but is it likely? Not really. Should we trust this process to luck? Why would we want to?

Consider this: **Where in life would you invest from \$50,000 to \$200,000 and not know what you're investing in, or the potential rate of return?** (These figures represent the average cost of a college education today.) Bottom line – we're haphazardly spending tons of money, time and energy on our children's education with an unknown return. Think of someone getting a college loan, dropping out after two years, now saddled with \$20,000 in debt. And now, what? That's definitely bad news and a bad investment.

We know that we, as adults, need to manage our own careers. We should not expect our employer to determine our career future. We need to be responsible and know our own talents – our strengths and weaknesses – and how to leverage them.

So ... why don't we empower young people to discover and pursue the right career early on, and avoid the mistakes they might make later as adults? Maybe that's the \$200,000 question.