



Career Planning: Students Need Help Starting Early and Staying Focused

Many students rely heavily on their interests when making college and career choices. Understanding how interests develop and relate to academic achievement will help high school counselors and other educators determine both when and how to help students prepare for college and a career. Students make more informed educational and career plans if they receive individualized and accurate feedback about their interests and academic achievement.

ACT's Educational Planning and Assessment System® (EPAS) provides academic achievement, career interest, and educational planning information to eighth, tenth, and eleventh/twelfth grade students and their parents. ACT's Interest Inventory is a component of its three EPAS programs (EXPLORE®, PLAN®, and the ACT®) and is administered to students at each of these grade levels. Because such a large number of schools participate in EPAS, ACT is able to study the academic and career-interest development of students from middle school through high school.

The sample for this study was based on 69,987 ACT-tested students who had participated in EPAS between 1997 and 2001. By following these students over time from eighth grade to high school graduation, we were able to answer several important questions about students' academic achievement and career development. The answers to these questions enable counselors, teachers, and parents to assist students during important academic and career transitions.

When Do Students Begin Thinking About Their Career Interests?

Students have career and occupational interests as early as the eighth grade (Tracey, Robbins, & Hofsess, 2005; Wimberly & Noeth, 2004). These interests then become clearer as students progress through high school. Remarkably, the interests of all students appear to develop at the same rate (Tracey & Robbins, in press), whether these interests include working with data or ideas, having technical and scientific careers, such as engineering, or having social careers, such as teaching or social work.

Most researchers agree that interests develop as a result of experience. Middle school is a good time to begin encouraging students to participate in a range of experiences. Students who have explored all of their educational and career options make more informed career decisions.

Are Students' Academic Achievement and Career Interests Related?

Although they certainly overlap, career interests and academic achievement appear to develop independently. That is, students may often have skills in an area in which they have little interest, or may be interested in an area in which they have few skills.

In making educational and career decisions, students need to be encouraged to consider both their interests and their skills. In cases where interests are stronger than skills, students should be encouraged to consider strategies for improving their skills.

Are Students' Career Interests Consistent with Their College Major and Career Choices?

Research suggests that it is important for students to have interests that are consistent with their college major and, ultimately, their career choice (Leuwerke, Robbins, Sawyer, & Hovland, 2004). Students who have interests that are consistent with their choice of college major are more likely to remain in college. Further, individuals who are interested in their work are more satisfied with that work.

Even when students' interests and choices are consistent, however, students' career choices may not be consistent with current or future workforce demands. For example, more ACT-tested students express a desire to enter occupations in the visual, performing, and applied arts than there are jobs in these areas. In contrast, fewer students express a desire to enter occupations in areas such as law enforcement, record keeping, and nursing – career areas in which there are many available jobs.

When making educational and career decisions, students need to be encouraged to investigate careers that are consistent with their interests. They should also be encouraged to consider the current and projected availability of employment in those careers.

Recommendations for Parents, Educators, and Counselors

Career development is a process. Students' interests are developed by the eighth grade but continue to develop and change during the high school years. Research suggests that systematic career education makes a difference. Parents, educators, and counselors can have a positive influence on the educational and career aspirations of young students by following a few basic principles:

- Begin talking to students about their academic and career interests during elementary and middle school.
- Help students think about the connections between academic coursework, college, and future career.
- Help students establish goals for getting more information about colleges and careers.

- Spend time reviewing students' interest inventory results.
- Promote students' college and career planning at school.
- Help students learn how to use sources of college and career information (e.g., DISCOVER, the *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, information interviews).
- Promote creative and informed career exploration through the use of structured programs or activities.

References

Leuwerke, W., Robbins, S., Sawyer, R., & Hovland, M. (2004). Predicting engineering major status from mathematics achievement and interest congruence. *Journal of Career Assessment, 12*, 135-149.

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Wimberly, G. L., & Noeth R. J. (2004). *College readiness begins in middle school*. Iowa City, IA: ACT.

