



What Makes Interests So Interesting?

“What are you interested in?”

This is probably a question you've heard hundreds of times throughout your life—in school, on a first date, at a job interview, talking to a career counselor. The list goes on and on. The subjects and activities you find fascinating have guided you throughout your life.

And they are especially important when it comes to pursuing your professional passions.

“ It is time to rethink the nature of interests and the role of interests in human behaviors and outcomes.

Most people seem to instinctively know that interests are important, but they've often been overlooked in educational research. As Rounds and Su point out in *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, “It is time to rethink the nature of interests and the role of interests in human behaviors and outcomes. Although meta-analysis has revealed the power of interests to predict educational and occupational choice, performance, and success, more research is needed to determine the mechanisms through which interests influence these outcomes.”¹

Interests merit much more investigation and application, especially in the field of education and career exploration. They're clearly powerful predictors that guide student behavior. Interests can help students develop *persistence*, empowering them to get through “boring” courses, difficult times, mountains of applications, and other barriers because they have goals they sincerely want to reach.

Read on to learn the allure of interests, how interests relate to career exploration, and why they're so *interesting*.

1 Rounds, James, and Su, Rong. “The Nature and Power of Interests.” *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 2014, pp. 1–6., doi:10.7554/elifesciences.25012.017.

Defining interest

Before we dive in, let's define the term interests.

The word "interest" is a widely-used, embracing term, so it's important to contextualize it. As they relate to professional and academic success, we define student interests as an inclination towards particular subjects that students easily connect with.

Interest: a focus of career exploration

Interest has long been a focus of career exploration. In a study published in *The School Counselor* in 1989, researchers noted that "career interest inventories have been widely used to assist young people in their career planning."

But they cautioned that these tools must include clear, understandable discussions of what interests in this context actually entail. Why? "Because most school-age youth have extremely limited, if any, occupational experiences."²

When defining interest, there's the dictionary definition, which certainly applies. The *New Oxford American Dictionary* definitions that apply to our discussion include "(1) the state of wanting to know or learn about something," which might apply more to the earlier stages of career exploration. In addition, it's also defined as "(4) a stake, share, or involvement in an undertaking," which might ring more true for those further along in their careers.³

Adding more nuance to interest as it pertains to this field, a report published in *Current Directions in Psychological Science* explains: "***in recent years...researchers from diverse areas of psychology have turned their attention to the role of interest in learning, motivation, and development.***"

The author (Silvia) recommends that "***Given interest's central role in cultivating knowledge and expertise, psychologists should apply research on interest to practical problems of learning, education, and motivation,***" something we agree with at The Myers-Briggs Company. In pursuit of this goal, this piece says "***a good case can be made for viewing interest as an emotion,***" meaning that all of the typical psychological aspects of emotion would also exist for interest. In this case, Silvia notes: "***interest appears to have...a stable pattern of cognitive appraisals...a subjective quality...and adaptive functions.***"⁴

2 Barker, Sandra B. and Patten, Glenda L. "Use of the Career Area Interest Checklist With Junior High School Students." *The School Counselor*, Vol. 37, No. 2. Nov. 1989, pp. 149-152.

3 Stevenson, Angus, and Christine A. Lindberg. "Interest." *New Oxford American Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, 2013.

4 Silvia, Paul J. "Interest -- The Curious Emotion." *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, Vol. 17, No. 1. Feb. 2008, pp. 57-60.

In other words, interest has many of the same qualities as other key emotions, such as happiness, frustration, or grief; it affects the way we think, identify ourselves, and, perhaps most crucially, make decisions.

Understanding interests provides more targeted, specific, applicable information when it comes to career exploration.

Rounds and Su define interests as “traitlike preferences for activities, contexts in which activities occur, or outcomes associated with preferred activities that motivate goal-oriented behaviors and orient individuals toward certain environments.”

Essentially, interests appear to cover characteristics, environments, and goals. In coordination with Silvia’s definition of interest, it appears to be the emotional characteristics that lead individuals to prefer certain activities, contexts, and outcomes.

In the field of career exploration, interests are often pitted against personality traits as significant predictive factors. While personality is important, interests are what lead to career success for students. Understanding interests provides more targeted, specific, applicable information when it comes to career exploration. Furthermore, as Rounds and Su explain, ***“interests [are] more stable across all age periods before middle adulthood” and “the peak of interest stability also occurs much earlier in life than the peak reported for personality traits...Interests describe a person in relation to the environment, which...appears to enhance their predictive utility.”***⁵

While personality traits are certainly worth exploring and studying from a self-awareness lens, interests are the guiding light and optimal factor to consider in career exploration.

As Rounds and Su note in their article, “[E.K.] Strong contextualized and defined occupational interest as the similarity of an individual’s preferences to the preferences of incumbents in various occupations. Thus, Strong’s research demonstrated that an individual’s references *in relation to the environment*, as measured by interest scales, are highly relevant to the success of the individual’s behaviors in that environment.”⁶

5 Rounds, James, and Rong Su. “The Nature and Power of Interests.” *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 2014, pp. 1–6., doi:10.7554/eliflife.25012.017.

6 Rounds, James, and Rong Su. “The Nature and Power of Interests.” *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 2014, pp. 1–6., doi:10.7554/eliflife.25012.017.



85% of first-year students agree that “studying in a field that really interests me” was an important motivator for enrolling in higher education.

The idea behind using interest assessments is this: if your interests align with another person’s interests, you’ll likely enjoy the career field they enjoy. So interests become an avenue worth exploring.

Interest and engagement

For most people, interests lead to engagement. Since certain new opportunities are inherently *interesting* to the students who discover them, they’re motivated to actually pursue them, giving students a driving force behind their studies.

As with interest, engagement has been and is growing as a recognized, important factor in educational success.

George D. Kuh explains, “When the history of American higher education is rewritten years from now, one of the storylines of the first decade of the twenty-first century likely will be the emergence of student engagement as an organizing construct for institutional assessment, accountability, and improvement efforts.” He insists that engagement is the metric by which schools should evaluate their efforts.

Kuh continues: “The engagement premise is straightforward and easily understood: the more students study a subject, the more they know about it, and the more students practice and get feedback from faculty and staff members...the deeper they come to understand what they are learning and the more adept they become at managing complexity, tolerating ambiguity, and working with people from different views.” Basically, if students actually *do* things, becoming active participants in their education, they will excel.

Kuh extends this connection between engagement and success beyond the confines of academia to the world of work. “Engaging in a variety of educationally productive activities also builds the foundation of skills and dispositions people need to live a productive, satisfying life after college. Said another way, engagement helps to develop habits of mind and heart that enlarge their capacity for continuous learning

and personal development.”⁷ Based on this approach, generating engagement is one of the most important things an educational institution can do—whether in middle school, high school, university, trade school, etc.— supported by their student success office and similar departments within. The way to accomplish this is with *interest*.

In an essay he wrote for *Inside Higher Ed*, Vincent Tinto argues that, in order to encourage student engagement, “institutions should see to it that students enroll in a field of study appropriate to their needs and interests,” since “students are more likely to want to learn basic skills because it helps them learn a subject in which they are interested.”⁸

By their very nature, interests spur **action**.

Kuh highlights how important it is that students be actively engaged with their education, and Tinto suggests that interest is a foundational element of this type of engagement.

As Paul J. Silvia notes in his piece, “interest’s physiological and expressive components...are associated with orientation, activation, concentration, and approach-oriented action.”⁹

Furthermore, Rounds and Su explain that “interest alignment leads to engagement, which leads to student action and achievement of your key strategic initiatives.”¹⁰ As you can see from the graph on the next page, interests are vastly more predictive than ability and personality when it comes to income, and significantly predictive in terms of occupational prestige, degree attainment, college persistence, and grades in college.

7 Kuh, George D. “The National Survey of Student Engagement: Conceptual and Empirical Foundations.” *New Directions in Institutional Research*, no. 141, Spring 2009. 2009, pp. 5-20.

8 Tinto, Vincent. “How to Improve Student Persistence and Completion (Essay) | Inside Higher Ed.” *Esports Quickly Expanding in Colleges*, Inside Higher Ed, 26 Sept. 2016, www.insidehighered.com/views/2016/09/26/how-improve-student-persistence-and-completion-essay.

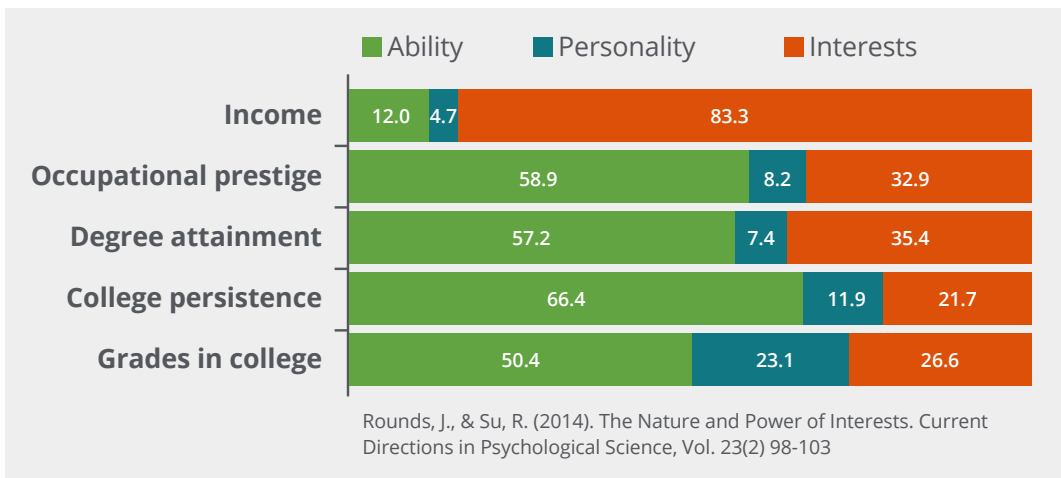
9 Silvia, Paul J. “Interest -- The Curious Emotion.” *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, Vol. 17, No. 1. Feb. 2008, pp. 57-60.

10 Rounds, James, and Rong Su. “The Nature and Power of Interests.” *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 2014, pp. 1–6., doi:10.7554/elifelife.25012.017.

Interests and inspiring students

First of all, interest plays an important role in fostering educational aspiration. In an article published in *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, a group of researchers discuss their study of “a sample of 365 college students,” in which they “examined the incremental role of personality, self-efficacy, and interests in explaining the level of educational aspirations.” They found that interest was a key determining factor in motivating educational engagement.

For example, they found that “students aspiring to higher levels of education were characterized by higher...Investigative Interests and Artistic Interests.”¹¹ This research specifically studied the beneficial effects of the *Strong Interest Inventory*[®] assessment. Identifying the types of interests students have and aligning them with educational aspirations, helps foster and guide academic engagement.



The results speak for themselves. As Rounds and Su found in their research on this topic, when compared with personality and ability, students’ interests are 35.4 percent predictive of degree attainment, 21.7 percent predictive of college persistence, and 26.6 percent predictive of grades in college. Rounds and Su note that, given the power and stability of interests, they are “suitable for use in academic and career guidance and prediction.”

11 Rottinghaus, Patrick J.; Lindley, Lori D.; Green, Melinda A.; Borgen, Fred H. “Educational Aspirations: The Contribution of Personality, Self-Efficacy, and Interests.” *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, Vol. 61, Issue 1, Aug. 2002, pp 1-19. doi:10.7554/elife.25012.017. doi:10.1006/jvbe.2001.1843.

Researchers found that students' interests are:



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By better understanding and following their interests, students are more likely to:

- **get through the rigors of higher education**
- **earn better grades**
- **finish their degree programs**

For instance, many students struggle with standardized tests, especially when they can't understand why the tests are needed. Having a clear plan about their career goals and understanding how their exams contribute to these can give students much-needed motivation to get through their tests.

As another example, some otherwise capable, even gifted students might be tempted to drift in school. They wonder, "What's the point?" They refuse to put in effort. Some even drop out. Many students end up leaving college during the first two years as they struggle with core courses or general education requirements. These courses are particularly difficult to get through when these classes don't have a clear goal, as part of a larger plan.

Getting students excited about a clearly structured path to their future can encourage them to reach their full potential in school and beyond. For example, Peyton Wells, a community college student who used a career exploration platform, called VitaNavis®, at her institution, explained, "I'm majoring in Criminal Justice and I got a bunch of job results that I would be able to do with this major. And there were jobs I'd never even thought about...the tools are so helpful. It's super easy to get more information about [these opportunities]. I've enjoyed reading through all the jobs and fields."

Comprehending interests, pursuing studies aligned with them, and understanding the occupational options related to their passions can help students like Peyton graduate on time and go on to successful careers, diplomas in hand.

Especially in the current educational environment, this is no small advantage. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, “the 6-year graduation rate for first-time, full-time undergraduate students” was just 63%. That means less than two-thirds of undergraduate students “completed a bachelor’s degree [within six years] at the same institution where they started.”¹² Complete College America is an initiative that seeks to raise these numbers by helping students create productive, proactive plans to finish their degrees. This organization notes “providing students opportunities to evaluate their interests” as a key step in improving college graduation rates.¹³

In line with Complete College America’s methods, Joe Cuseo, a thought leader in academic retention strategies, cites “self-assessment and self-awareness (for example, assessment of learning styles and career interests)” as part of the first year experience he recommends in his “Preparing the Underprepared” program.¹⁴

Platforms that help students understand interests and career pathways have become a necessary component for many Guided Pathways initiatives at community colleges and other institutions. As the Washington Community and Technical Colleges site explains, “Guided Pathways is a research-based approach that simplifies choices for students. Courses are grouped together to form clear paths through college and into careers...Students get intensive, targeted advice to choose a path, stay on the path, learn what they need to know, and graduate.”¹⁵ Schools all across the United States are implementing this approach. Assessments or technology platforms that start with a focus on interests, as well as personality, can help students choose a pathway they’ll likely be more excited about completing.

One of the most interesting things about interests is their ability to get—and keep—students on track. Students achieve academic success because they have become more invested and are more likely to persist with their courses and the occupational destination of their education.

12 “Fast Facts.” Revenues and Expenditures for Public Elementary and Secondary Education: School Year 2001-2002, E.D. Tab, National Center for Education Statistics, 2017, nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=40.

13 “Academic Maps with Proactive Advising.” Complete College America, completecollege.org/strategy/academic-maps-with-proactive-advising/.

14 Cuseo, Joe. “Preparing the Underprepared: Strategies for Promoting New-Student Success.” Higher ed hero conference. 3 Jun. 2010.

15 “Guided Pathways.” Transfer Research Reports | SBCTC, 2017, www.sbctc.edu/colleges-staff/programs-services/student-success-center/guided-pathways.aspx.

Engaging occupations

Understanding and pursuing interests also contributes tremendously to a productive, fulfilling career.

Numerous studies have demonstrated that interest in a subject is correlated to professional success. A study on business students published in the *Journal of Southeast Asian Research* "revealed that 'interest in the subject' is the most dominant factor influencing career choices...lack of interest in the subject is dangerous and could end up in disastrous results."

Unfortunately, interest is so tied to occupational outcomes that a deficit in interest could lead to career failure. To avoid this fate, the authors of this study emphasize "the importance of students' counseling sessions and other interventions to provide them with updated knowledge and information to create their interest in the right choices and available options."¹⁶

Another indicator of success is the fit between a job and a worker's interest in it.

As the notable 2017 book *Personality Development Across the Lifespan* notes, "interests are...widely used for prediction; a substantial body of research has shown that interest fit predicts employment outcomes, such as job satisfaction and job performance."¹⁷ Everyone *has* interests, but to maximize their power, you need to align yours (or your students') with an occupation that suits them. When you find your career *interesting*, it is much easier to be productive, remain satisfied, and do your best work.

In addition, research demonstrates that interest is crucial to career longevity.

16 Ahmed, Kazi Afaq; Sharif, Nimra; and Ahmad, Nawaz. "Factors Influencing Students' Career Choices: Empirical Evidence from Business Students." *Journal of Southeast Asian Research*, vol. 2017. Pp 1-15, 2017.

17 Stoll, Gundula and Trautwein, Ulrich. *Personality Development Across the Lifespan*, Chapter 25 (book). Dec. 2017.

If you're truly passionate about your work, it's much more difficult to get burned out, switch paths, or simply become discontented with your occupation. As a piece in *Harvard Business Review* explains:

“ A sustainable career is dynamic and flexible; it features...a harmonious fit with your skills, interests, and values. The keys to crafting a sustainable career are knowing yourself—what interests you, what you do best and not so well, what energizes you—and being acutely attuned to the fields and companies you're interested in, so that you can identify places where you can add value.¹⁸

Given these factors, it's not at all surprising that interests are more predictive of income (83.3 percent) than either ability or personality. They're also 32.9 percent predictive of professional prestige.¹⁹ Those who find the right occupational fit for their interests excel in their careers by virtually all metrics: finance, professional status, and happiness, among others.



Interests are **83%** more predictive of future income than either ability or personality.

18 Valcour, Monique. "Craft a Sustainable Career." *Harvard Business Review*, 7 Aug. 2014, hbr.org/2013/07/craft-a-sustainable-career.

19 Rounds, James, and Rong Su. "The Nature and Power of Interests." *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 2014, pp. 1-6., doi:10.7554/elifelife.25012.017.

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