



# What Makes Interests So Interesting?

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# WHAT MAKES INTERESTS SO INTERESTING?

“What interests you?” 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 probably guided you throughout your life. They are especially important when it comes to pursuing your professional passions.

We all seem to instinctively know that interests are important, but the fact of the matter is that they’ve often been overlooked in educational research. As Rounds and Su point out in a piece published 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.”<sup>1</sup> Interests merit much more investigation and application, especially in the field of education and career exploration. They are clearly powerful predictors that guide student behavior. Perhaps the most vital aspect of interests is that they 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.

With the VitaNavis® solution, we are proud to harness the power of interests. Our exploration platform, which offers the SuperStrong® interest assessment (based on the Strong Interest Inventory® tool), represents and utilizes the findings of nearly a century of research on this topic. In the following white paper, we’ll explain the allure of interests, how they operate in career exploration, and why they are so *interesting*.

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

## DEFINING INTEREST

Before we dive into the interesting world of interests, it's important to ensure that we are all on the same page with how we define this term. Of course, the word "interest" is a widely-used, embracing term, so it's important to contextualize it. For example, when students utilize our platform, we refine their results and our recommendations according to their interests in, say, creativity and enterprise, not by their favorite boy band or television show. In this discussion, we are primarily focused on interest as it relates to professional and academic life and success.

As the history of the SuperStrong demonstrates, interest has long been a focus of career exploration. As early as a study published in *The School Counselor* in 1989, researchers noted: "career interest inventories have been widely used to assist young people in their career planning," but cautioned that these tools must include clear, understandable discussions of what interests in this context actually entail "because most school-age youth have extremely limited, if any, occupational experiences."<sup>2</sup>

When defining interest, there is, obviously, 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 and "(4) a stake, share, or involvement in an undertaking," which might ring more true for those further along in their careers.<sup>3</sup>

Adding more nuance to interest as it pertains to this field, a report published in *Current Directions in Psychological Science* explains: "in recent years...



<sup>2</sup> 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.

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

researchers from diverse areas of psychology have turned their attention to the role of interest in learning, motivation, and development.” The author (Silvia) recommends: “Given interest’s central role in cultivating knowledge and expertise, psychologists should apply research on interest to practical problems of learning, education, and motivation,” a sentiment with which we wholeheartedly agree, given that this is one of our main missions with VitaNavis. In pursuit of this goal, this piece argues: “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.”<sup>4</sup> 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.

Rounds and Su (mentioned above as strong proponents of interest research), “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 obviously important (after all, VitaNavis is closely associated with the Myers-Briggs assessment, the most well-known personality tool worldwide), it is a very broad category of information. 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

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<sup>4</sup> Silvia, Paul J. “Interest – The Curious Emotion.” *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, Vol. 17, No. 1. Feb. 2008, pp. 57-60.

“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.”<sup>5</sup> 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.

With the VitaNavis platform, the results define interests in relation to careers that translate to the job sector and workforce. We consider what an individual likes to do—i.e. build things, help others, work alone, etc.—and match their interests with those of individuals who work in particular fields. This allows us to present career options. 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 [like those used on the VitaNavis platform], are highly relevant to the success of the individual’s behaviors in that environment.”<sup>6</sup> The central idea behind the Strong and SuperStrong assessments is that, if you have interests that align with the interests of another person in a field they love, you are more likely to enjoy that field as well, so it is an avenue worth exploring.

## INTEREST AND ENGAGEMENT

One of the central conceptual pillars of our platform is that interest will lead to engagement. The VitaNavis platform allows students to instantly see possibilities they never even realized existed, but are expertly tailored to their distinctive interests. Since these new opportunities are inherently *interesting* to the students who discover them, they’re motivated to actually

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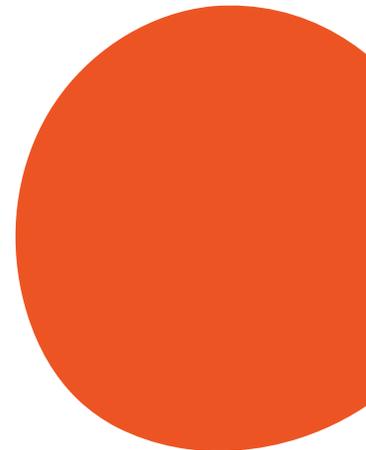
5 Rounds, James, and Rong Su. “The Nature and Power of Interests .” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* , 2014, pp. 1–6., doi:10.7554/elifesciences.25012.017.

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

*pursue* them, giving students a driving force behind their studies. Once the assessment and related materials have fully engaged students in this process, educators can use their pupils' newfound excitement (and the detailed data from VitaNavis' back-end) to guide students in a known direction. Rather than slogging through studies in order to reach an uncertain outcome, students and educators can truly work together. In this way, the VitaNavis platform inspires all involved to take *action* to improve their circumstances.

As with interest, engagement has been and is growing as a recognized, important factor in the success of education. 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, the idea is that 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, as well: "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.”<sup>7</sup> 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.”<sup>8</sup> 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.

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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](http://www.insidehighered.com/views/2016/09/26/how-improve-student-persistence-and-completion-essay).



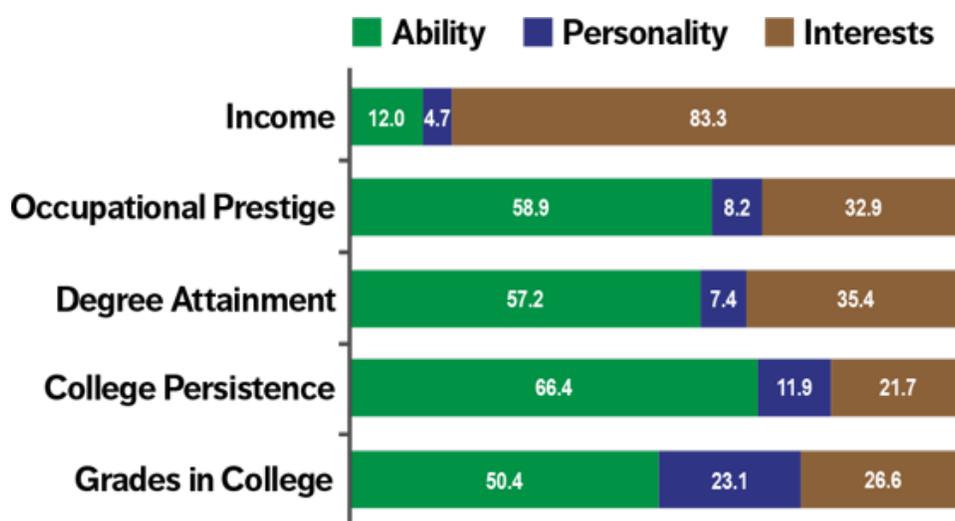
# 85%

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



As Paul J. Silvia notes in his piece, “interest’s physiological and expressive components...are associated with orientation, activation, concentration, and approach-oriented action.”<sup>9</sup> By their very nature, interests spur *action*.

Furthermore, Rounds and Su explain: “interest alignment leads to engagement, which leads to student action and achievement of your key strategic initiatives.”<sup>10</sup> As you can see from the graph below, 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.



Rounds, J., & Su, R. (2014). The Nature and Power of Interests. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, Vol. 23(2) 98–103.

One of the main values of interests lies in their ability to *engage* students, which, as demonstrated, leads to tangible, proven outcomes for students and educational organizations. As a specific case study on how VitaNavis benefits schools, take the Community College of Denver (CCD). Mike Nowicki, Director of the Educational Opportunity Center at this school, chose our platform because he believes that career exploration tools should help students develop self-awareness and gain access to resources without making hard suggestions. He uses the SuperStrong assessment on VitaNavis with his students so that they can identify a pathway that

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/elife.25012.017.



# 90%

of of students who participate in CCD's "Chart Your Path" hour-long group exercise exit having made a decision about their future pathway.

feels right for them rather than being told which aspiration is best for them. Mr. Nowicki appreciates our platform because it fully *engages* his students, encouraging them to be active participants in their futures rather than passively receiving and obeying results. Using VitaNavis, Mr. Nowicki created the "Chart Your Path" program, which helps undecided students explore majors, certificates, and programs. 90 percent of students who participate in this hour-long group exercise exit having made a decision about their future pathway. These outstanding statistics from CCD represent just one example of the outcomes VitaNavis' educational partners regularly enjoy.

## INTERESTING AND INSPIRING STUDENTS

We've already highlighted the connection between engagement and interest, but how does this relationship specifically apply to students? Fortunately, a bounty of research exists on this topic.

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 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 “Artistics Interests.”<sup>11</sup> This research specifically studied the beneficial effects of the Strong Interest Inventory assessment, on which the SuperStrong assessment on the VitaNavis platform is based. By identifying the types of interests students have, and aligning those with educational aspirations along with the exploration tools VitaNavis offers, such as career pathways and the educational institution search, our solution tool 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.” By better understanding and following their interests, students can more easily get through college, earn good grades, and finish their degree programs.

For instance, many students struggle with standardized tests, especially when they cannot fathom why they are possibly necessary. 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 quite able, even gifted students might be tempted to drift in school, wondering “what’s the point?” and refusing to put in the effort, which could even lead them to drop out. Many students end up leaving college during the first two years as they struggle with “core courses” or general education requirements, which are particularly difficult to get through when these classes don’t have a clear goal, as part of a larger plan.

<sup>11</sup> 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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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 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 “59 percent,” meaning that less than two-thirds of undergraduate students “completed a bachelor’s degree [within six years] at the same institution where they started.”<sup>12</sup> 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 “provi[ding] students opportunities to evaluate their interests” as a key step in improving college graduation rates.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup>

The VitaNavis platform has also become a necessary component for many Guided Pathways initiatives at community colleges and other institutions.

<sup>12</sup> “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](https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=40).

<sup>13</sup> “Academic Maps with Proactive Advising.” Complete College America, [completecollege.org/strategy/academic-maps-with-proactive-advising/](https://completecollege.org/strategy/academic-maps-with-proactive-advising/).

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

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 advising to choose a path, stay on the path, learn what they need to know, and graduate.”<sup>15</sup> Schools all across the United States are implementing this approach, and VitaNavis is often a key component of it. Our platform helps students and advisers identify students’ interests so they can then choose a pathway accordingly. The platform links students’ results directly to campus majors and programs, enabling personalized conversations between students, admissions, enrollment, and counselors. VitaNavis’ proven techniques help students learn more about themselves so they can select the *right* academic journey and see it through to completion.

One of the most interesting things about interests is their ability to get - and keep - students on track, achieving academic success because they truly care about and are thus able to persist with their courses and the occupational destination of their education.

## INTERESTING 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

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<sup>15</sup> “Guided Pathways.” Transfer Research Reports | SBCTC, 2017, [www.sbctc.edu/colleges-staff/programs-services/student-success-center/guided-pathways.aspx](http://www.sbctc.edu/colleges-staff/programs-services/student-success-center/guided-pathways.aspx).

their interest in the right choices and available options.”<sup>16</sup> VitaNavis does just that - our platform provides insights into students’ interests, then links these to viable jobs in all industries (while indicating growth or declines in real-time). At the same time, it provides student data to the school to inform student success initiative planning.

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.”<sup>17</sup> 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.

Furthermore, research demonstrates that interest is crucial to career longevity. If you’re truly passionate about your work, it’s much more difficult to get burned out, decide to 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.”<sup>18</sup> Powered by the SuperStrong assessment, VitaNavis provides the precise tools needed to do just this by giving users insights about their interests, then linking these to growing fields and types of potential positions they would find truly interesting.

*VitaNavis provides the precise tools needed to give users insights about their interests, then linking these to growing fields and types of potential positions they would find truly interesting.*

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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.

18 Valcour, Monique. “Craft a Sustainable Career.” *Harvard Business Review*, 7 Aug. 2014, [hbr.org/2013/07/craft-a-sustainable-career](http://hbr.org/2013/07/craft-a-sustainable-career).

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.<sup>19</sup> 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.

## EXPLORE VITANAVIS

In the rapidly-evolving twenty-first century world of work, students need clear, productive guidance to help them find their way. Although career counseling is more vital than ever, its value is often underestimated. As career counselors, academic advisors, student services representatives, and other education professionals grapple with this, students become disheartened, only worsening the issue. Furthermore, misunderstandings between students and advisors mar what could be one of the most important mentoring relationships they'll forge.

Fortunately, research and practice demonstrate that career exploration tools offer a simple, streamlined, successful solution to the challenges facing career counseling. By giving students and counselors a standard vocabulary to use, career exploration tools can reignite pupils' passion for pursuing their future occupations and provide career counselors with actionable tools to help them. With an effective career exploration tool, career counseling departments can not only repair themselves, but become stronger than they've ever been.

Backed by decades of research, powered by an approachable interface, and bolstered by a network of supplementary resources, the VitaNavis platform gives students the detailed observations they need to pursue the correct careers for them. Most importantly, the VitaNavis platform offers a standard, compelling method for career counselors and students to engage with each other, benefitting all involved.

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



Visit [get.vitanavis.com](https://get.vitanavis.com) to explore how interest-based assessments can increase persistence and success at your institution.

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