

# Design Your Decision and Determine Your Destiny

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**MAKING A DECISION FOR** success is essential in long-term STEM career management, whether in cybersecurity or new media arts. Determining the strategies we need to define and then accomplish success is an exercise that requires both reflection and resilience. Strategic assessment of our own career is not for the faint of heart and can be a painful yet essential process. Wise counsel in the form of mentoring, coaching and advising has a vital role in the design and execution of a robust academic or career roadmap.

It all starts with a decision — a decision that while being guided by other people has to be rooted in concrete, not abstract, approaches to success. Decision-making is a learned skill that gets better with experience. For example, when I was deciding which college to attend, strategic on-campus visits provided the best information possible. Back in the 1970s, there was no Internet (really — I am not joking) to look up student experiences. There also weren't cell phones to easily reach students and faculty to explore the subtle nuances with a particular institution. You relied on brochures, reputation, guidance counselors and sometimes hearsay. Today, there are several sources of information we can utilize to make personal and professional decisions.

My three D's to "Design Your Decision and Determine Your Destiny" are:

**1) Distinguish** the true parameters of the decision you are making. When making a key decision, you need to have all of the facts and make sure you are not comparing nuts and bolts (or apples and oranges). For example,

when trying to decide between Community College X and Community College Y with the same STEM curriculum for the field you will pursue, you'll need to look at parameters such as cost, distance, graduation rates, accessibility to faculty and job placement. If you have a scholarship that covers everything, for example, then cost becomes less of a factor in the decision-making process.

**2) Document** promises made by others that can impact your performance, "happiness quotient" and compensation in the future. Let's say that you are exploring two career pathways in a pharmaceutical plant: technical and managerial. The first one promises continued compensation tied to the company success (i.e., bonuses), travel and educational opportunities (i.e., MBA support). In contrast, the managerial track, and the associated training is the path required to be a plant manager and eventually a CEO. Closer examination may reveal: less than 1 percent of the employees are really on track to be CEO; you can pursue a second degree only after five years of outstanding performance with the company; and travel is only for direct business functions and not for technical conferences in your profession. If you are promised an exception to established processes, get it in writing; managers can change overnight!

**3) Diversify** the options you consider in the short and long-term timeframe of your education or career. The wonder of a career in STEM is that you have so many options available. It can also be a confusing drawback in your quest to streamline your educational and workforce related pursuits. As the fields

in STEM emerge, evolve and expand, there are changes that result in the development of new areas (at least by name). For example, new media arts may have existed in several different parts many years ago, but now it has an official name. Similarly, your interests may grow or wane in your core area of expertise; continued exploration of the options in related STEM areas will keep you intellectually engaged, stimulated and challenged.

At the end of the process, there may be two options that are really close. When there is no significant career benefit or fiscal bonus and there is little risk associated with the final decision, we need to trust our gut instinct. Specifically we need to "Trust Our Gut for Great Lifelong Experiences," or TOGGLE.

According to Merriam-Webster, the simple definition of the verb "toggle" in the computer realm is "to switch between two options by pressing a single key, making a single choice from a menu." In this case, the single key is the decision that you will make to 1) start you on your STEM journey, 2) redefine your midcareer options and 3) define alternatives to traditional retirement. Just remember that your decisions set the stage and determine your STEM destiny. In my personal experience, when I did not trust my own gut instinct, I had to toggle back to a different option later. I don't want you to make that same mistake.



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