Choosing Your Major

Discovering Your True Fit
Begin the Process

When it comes to big life decisions, choosing a major is certainly one of them. It’s a process that deserves time and attention – you don’t want to jump in too quickly! Try not to panic or put too much pressure on yourself. It’s something you have to do, yes, but you don’t have to do it alone. As you go through this guide, the process of choosing a major will become much clearer and more manageable.

“He Knows What He Wants to Do!”

It’s easy to look at your classmates who seem certain about their majors. Pre-med fits her, you think. He was born to be a broadcaster, you sigh. When will you find your “perfect” match?

This isn’t some collegiate dating game! Instead, it’s about examining who you are and what’s important to you. It’s about determining your interests and abilities. And, in the end, it’s about deciding what major will satisfy you in a number of ways, including:

- subject matter you have a passion for
- topics that challenge you
- class projects you look forward to
- subjects you like to spend time with
- ideas that inspire you
- tasks that speak to your interests and abilities
- the kind of work you’ll be proud to do

In order to find a major that meets these criteria, you may need to take a variety of classes. Talk with your academic advisor today about smart ways to explore different subjects while still meeting your core requirements. Don’t delay!

Change is Okay

Many students change their major once - or more. And that’s okay. It’s part of the process as you “try on” different subjects.

It’s best to get used to change, especially since you’ll likely change careers several times throughout your lifetime, too. As you evolve, you’ll discover new interests and abilities. There’s nothing saying that you have to be one thing for the rest of your life. That decision is up to you!

Unlock the possibilities...

Major: Communications

editorial assistant • radio announcer • development officer/fundraiser • translator
public relations consultant • speech pathologist • lobbyist • museum director • consumer
advocate • speech writer • human resources administrator • special events coordinator
training specialist • production assistant • fashion merchandiser • travel agent
Lay It Out On the Table

There are many thoughts and emotions tied into the decision-making process. And all of them are valid, simply because they belong to you. Recognize what you’re thinking and what you’re feeling before going any further. Just lay it all out on the table. For instance, do any of these items below look familiar?

Feelings About Choosing a Major
- Panic and anxiety
- Excitement and enthusiasm
- Pride
- Worry and indecision
- Being “stuck”
- Not wanting to let anyone down

Thoughts About Choosing a Major
- What identity am I taking on?
- Will I be able to handle the course load?
- Do I have the skills?
- Am I being swayed by anything/anyone?
- Am I smart enough?
- What jobs will I be qualified for?

As you process through these things and more, it can be easy for people and situations to sway you. When it comes down to it, though, you need to be your own influence. Don’t let others be your only influence when they say things like, “You’ll be the next lawyer in the family” or “You need a professional major, not a liberal arts one, in order to make any kind of money.” There will always be critics and people with good intentions. However, your voice is the one that ultimately matters. So, gather the facts, slog through the thoughts and emotions, and make your decision. Then, trust it.

It’s Not Just About the Major

Choosing a major is just one part of your career path. Potential employers will be looking at your major, your minor and your coursework, of course. Yet, they’ll also be very interested in what you did outside of class. What activities are you part of? What leadership skills are you acquiring? What volunteer organizations do you donate your time to? The answers to these types of questions will have an impact. Your employee “package” is about a whole lot more than simply what you majored in.

Unlock the possibilities...

Major: Chemistry

- patent agent
- optometrist
- nurse
- hydrologist
- soil technician
- crime lab analyst
- molecular biologist
- toxicologist
- brewer lab assistant
- food scientist
- genetic counselor
- pharmaceutical sales rep
- biochemist
- environmental health specialist
- perfumer
- occupational safety specialist
- EPA inspector
- cooperative extension agent
Identify Your Interests

Take a few minutes to brainstorm everything that you’re interested in onto a piece of paper. Don’t judge or censor yourself - just jot it all down. The list can include anything!

The process of choosing a major often starts with this simple step. These are the things you like to do, the things in life that have captured your interest. Ask yourself a few more questions to discover other areas of interest. For instance:

- What activities are you drawn to?
- If you had free time this weekend, what would you choose to do?
- What topics do you like to read about?
- How do you answer when folks ask you what you’re interested in? Why?

Now, keep these interests in mind. It’s a piece of the puzzle as you determine which major will fit you best.

Explore Your Values

Having a major that matches your values is essential. Few people can stand spending so much time with a subject that ethically doesn’t fit. And, once you get out into the real world, you’ll feel much more committed to a job that you value.

What does that mean to you - valuing your work? How do you hope to feel about the major and, later, the job that you ultimately choose? Here are a few other values-oriented questions to ask yourself:

- What classes have felt most worthwhile to you so far?
- Why did you place that value on them?
- What are the key values you hope to have in the workplace? Making a difference? Making money? Making a reputation?

Your values can be one of your guides as you search for that fit.

Choosing a Minor

As you examine your interests, abilities and values, you may discover that you’d like to explore a subject as a minor. That’s part of this process, too! Talk with your advisor about the difference between majors and minors before making your decision.
Examine Your “Fit”

Take a Look at the Details

As you’re examining your interests, values and abilities, don’t forget to note the fine print when it comes to your institution. There may be some details associated with certain majors that deserve careful consideration. For instance:

- **Major Requirements.** Do you need a certain GPA to apply for a major program? Are there prerequisites before you’re admitted? Is there a limit on how many students can be in a major? Check into these details now so you have all the information.

- **Additional Obligations.** Some majors may require that you do a practicum, a field study or some other out-of-class task. These are all great opportunities! Just gather the info so you know what you’re getting into.

- **Degree Completion.** Talk with department chairs, faculty and your advisor about how long it will take to complete requirements for your field of study. Do students in this major typically graduate in four years? If not, why? Are you on track with your classes and any credits you came to school with? Know what’s up when it comes to getting that degree.

Check into these details yet be careful not to get overwhelmed by them. Sort through things you’re unsure of with your advisor and other trusted consultants. Ask questions and discuss the “what ifs.” It’s your right and your responsibility.

Acknowledge Your Abilities

Chances are that you’re able to do quite a few things! Just look at what you’re able to accomplish in your academic, social, work and extracurricular life. These abilities can lend a clue as you determine which major to pursue.

So, take stock of your abilities by asking yourself a few questions:

- What were my best subjects in high school?
- What are my best subjects in college?
- What talents have I used in my past jobs?
- What skills do I bring to my extracurricular activities?
- What abilities help me do a good job during community service projects?
- What talents would I like to develop?

Yes, you’re a work in progress. Who isn’t?
There are some key resources at your fingertips on a college campus, there to assist as you make decisions about your major. However, these resources mean nothing if you don’t take the initiative to use them! So, get out there and…

Get to Know Your Advisor

Your academic advisor isn’t just there to sign off on your classes before registration. He/she is there to help you navigate the academic waters and make good choices. That’s why it’s important to be proactive in establishing a relationship with your advisor. Make an appointment to visit so you become more than just a name. Ask him or her to help you create an outline of classes and other requirements so you can graduate on time. Talk through your dilemma when it comes to choosing a major. And get to know your advisor as a person, too.

Get to Know Faculty and Department Chairs

As you’re searching for information about certain majors, why not talk with faculty members and department chairs? They know their majors inside and out, after all, and can share nuances with you that you may not have considered. So, get in there and make an appointment to do an informational interview. Ask questions about classes offered within the major, internship/field study requirements, what students can do with such a major and more. Show an interest and they’re bound to reciprocate.

Get to Know Career Counselors

The Career Center isn’t just for seniors needing resume assistance. Anyone can use them - and should! These folks are full of information and resources, from interest inventories to “What can I do with a major in…?” answers. Career exploration is a multi-year process and it makes sense to get started now.

Start Developing Relationships Now!

The fact is, the longer you go without a declared major, the longer you may have to remain in school. That’s why it’s so important to develop relationships NOW. Take advantage of the guidance and resources available to you. It’s never too early to start!

Unlock the possibilities...

Major: Business

transportation director • stock broker • restaurant manager • credit analyst • consultant
trust administrator • sales manager • media planner • labor relations manager • purser
entertainment manager • payroll officer • insurance agent • compensation manager
training manager • risk management officer • purchasing agent • small business owner
Discovering Your True Fit

Tap into Resources

There are many resources available to you as you decide which major to pursue. Here’s just a sampling:

Your Career Center
This office has everything from self-assessment instruments to the Directory of Occupational Titles, a book filled with thousands of job descriptions. Plus, check out the Career Center website for additional online resources. And nothing beats talking face-to-face with one of the well-trained career counselors!

The Course Catalog
Browse through all the classes available within each major. What does it take to get a major and what’s required for a minor? If the course listings spark your interest, you may be on to something.

Upperclass Students in Certain Majors
Ask your advisor to help hook you up with an upperclass student in a major that interests you. Then pick that person’s brain. It could be one of the best 45-minute periods you’ll ever spend!

Alums
Contact the campus alumni office to see if they have a job-shadowing program. This allows you to shadow an alum for a day in an effort to learn about what really goes into certain careers.

Campus Happenings
Your campus is a lively place, filled with the exchange of ideas on a daily basis. Take advantage of this exchange by attending free activity and job fairs, residence hall programs, career panels, guest lectures and more. Soak in as much information as you can to help in your decision-making process.

A Sampling of Online Resources
Learn what to do with different majors at:

- Ashland University at www.ashland.edu/cardev/edm-major.html
- University of NC-Wilmington at www.uncwil.edu/stuaff/career/majors/
- The University of Kansas at www.ku.edu/~uces/major/index.shtml
- Check out the University of Delaware’s “Major Resource Kits,” featuring sample job titles for entry level and advanced positions, employer possibilities and other info sources at www.udel.edu/CSC/mrk.html
- And Monster.com offers a “Major to Career Converter” at 6steps.monster.com/step1/careerconverter

Unlock the possibilities...

Major: Math

- computer engineer • environmental tech • pollution meteorologist • investment banker
- air traffic controller • network programmer • research analyst • software support specialist
- transportation planner • urban planner • statistician • risk and insurance specialist
- estate planner • economist • mortgage researcher • astronomer • accountant • demographer

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It’s time for a reality check. There’s an Ideal Self and a Real Self inside of you. And, as you evaluate your major and career options, it makes good sense to have your Real Self be in charge.

Your Ideal Self is that person you may wish to be or who others have built you up to be. It’s the self possibly created by family/societal expectations. It’s not really you.

Your Real Self is who you are today, talents, flaws and all. It’s the self interested in finding a true fit; a major that is congruent with your interests, values and abilities. It’s who you really are.

Narrowing It Down

Are there a few majors that you can definitely rule out? List them here:

1. 
2. 
3. 
4. 
5. 

Knowing what you don’t want to do can help you narrow down the field.

Okay, now what majors have made it to your Top 5? List them here:

1. 
2. 
3. 
4. 
5. 

Once you’ve explored the vast array of possibilities, narrowing it down to a few choices makes sense. It gives you more focus so you can explore the real possibilities within each.

Choosing a major is an important process, without a doubt. The process of exploration can form you just as much as the major can! Just think about it, you’ll be talking with professionals, exploring your interests, getting in touch with your values and examining the possibilities. You deserve to know yourself better once this process is complete. There’s no doubt that you will.