Choosing and Using Your Major

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Separating Myth from Reality

The "Major" Myth

_So, what are you going to major in?_ Though this is a common question, it is one that continually raises issues for most incoming first year students. Many college students think each career field has a corresponding academic major, and that it's impossible to enter most career fields unless they choose that matching major for undergraduate study. This is not true! If it were, wouldn't we see a lot more Professional Philosophers out in the workforce?

The Realities

The relationship of college majors to career fields varies greatly. Obviously, some career choices dictate that you choose a specific undergraduate major. If you want to be a nurse, you must major in nursing. Engineers major in engineering. Accountants major in accounting. There is no other way to be certified as a nurse, engineer, or accountant. However, _most career fields don't require a specific major, and people with specific majors don't have to use them in ways most commonly expected._

_Most college majors don't offer specific preparation for a single type of work._ Instead, they educate you and help you to develop marketable skills that you can and will use in the workplace. Majors don't limit you to one type of work. In a survey of 2012 U.Va. Arts and Sciences graduates, only 27% stated there was a direct connection between their undergraduate major and their current career. This doesn't mean they were all working as baristas or restaurant servers after
graduation, however. The fields they represent include: Advertising/Public Relations, Education, Consulting Services, Healthcare, and Politics. Although the connection between your specific academic major and your ideal career field may not be apparent yet, the transferable skills that you gain as a student will be invaluable to your career success. Your awareness of the relationship between career fields, college majors, and the transferable skills gained through academic study and research can play a vital role in your choice of academic major, minor, and elective courses.

**Your choice of a major is only one factor in determining your future job prospects and career path.** Your grades, the electives you choose, and the skills you acquire through your coursework often tell employers more about what you have to offer than your major does. Furthermore, other factors such as your energy and enthusiasm, your goals, your experiences (jobs, extracurricular activities, volunteer work, internships, externships), and your knowledge of and demonstrated interest in a career field play a large part in determining an employer's response to you.

**Asking the Right Questions**

Perhaps the primary reason students choose the wrong major is that so many concentrate exclusively on studying for a specific "job," as if each job required a certain major. This orientation has been fostered by the attitudes of parents, employers, government officials, and educators. Additionally, students often choose their majors unwisely because they lack sufficient information about themselves, potential courses of study, jobs and the job market, and above all about how to combine their education with their career goals.

The truth is: **career decision making is a developmental process that you will engage in during your college years and throughout the course of your life.** Every time you think about and explore career options, you engage in the career decision making process. While this process may typically involve certain steps or stages, there is no specific, linear course that defines your unique career exploration and decision making path.

Compare the process to map-making. **You actually chart your college career using your career goals as the basis for decisions about academic major, minor, elective courses, internships, vacation jobs, leadership commitments, and extracurricular activities.** Instead of looking at an academic major itself as a map, view the choice of academic major as one part of the map you are making in order to reach your chosen career goal. Don't limit yourself by starting with the question "What can I do with my major?" and then, after reading about what other people with the same major are doing to earn money, decide without further thought to look for the same kind of job when you graduate. How many times have you heard someone say, "I'm majoring in English so I guess I'll teach"? If questioned further, this person might not like anything about teaching except the subject matter. Obviously, this person chose to follow someone else's map.
Going Beyond Your Major

Whatever major you choose, in today’s job market, you need to offer employers more than broadly-based transferable skills. It’s important to simultaneously develop practical workplace skills and get to know the industry you believe you want to enter. Furthermore, increasing numbers of college graduates, effects of economic recession, and other labor market factors have led to more competition in the entry-level job market. **In most cases a college major alone is not sufficient for getting a job.**

To become competitive in today’s market, you need the experience and competencies related to your chosen fields. Usually, the easiest way to land that first job is to have a skill that is immediately useful to the employer. There are many ways to develop such skills while you are in college. **Internships, externships, part-time jobs, and extracurricular activities provide numerous opportunities for you to gain experience and develop the skills required to be successful in your first job.** The list below shows what employers of recent grads look for.

**The Top-10 Candidate Skills/Qualities Employers Seek**

1. Ability to verbally communicate with persons inside and outside the organization
2. Ability to work in a team structure
3. Ability to make decisions and solve problems
4. Ability to plan, organize, and prioritize work
5. Ability to obtain and process information
6. Ability to analyze quantitative data
7. Technical knowledge related to the job
8. Proficiency with computer software programs
9. Ability to create and/or edit written reports
10. Ability to sell or influence others

*Source: Job Outlook 2013, National Association of Colleges and Employers*

Activity outside the classroom – whether it is career-related or not, whether a paid position or voluntary service – will give you the opportunity to develop many of these essential skills. **Why should this matter to you?**

First, increasingly, employers choose **new hires from their pool of former interns.** Of the May 2012 graduates of the College of Arts & Sciences, 27% reported receiving a full-time offer after their third year internship. So, to be competitive, you must start early and demonstrate the drive to gain career-related experience beyond that provided through academic coursework alone.

Second, internships and volunteer activities have an even more fundamental purpose that is crucial to finding the right job after college: self-exploration. Shadowing someone in a career field of interest or taking a part-time job in a work setting about which you are curious can give you the "inside view" you need to analyze whether the field will be truly satisfying for you. "Is the day-to-day work dynamic enough for me? Do I really enjoy working with the type of people in this field? Is the hectic pace exciting or exhausting?" **Outside-the-classroom activities allow you to explore potential careers early enough to test perceptions of yourself against working-world realities.**
Strategies for Choosing a Major

When the time comes to choose your major, refer back to your personal "map." If drawn to your specifications, you will probably find that one of the following three strategies for choosing a major will apply to you:

❖ **Major in something with a high potential for developing you as a human being.**
  Many students come to UVa to experience intellectual discourse, gain exposure to scholarship, and develop as a person. For some, a bioethics course may resonate and help to develop a new course in life. For others, creative writing brings about a new sense of self and a new untapped skill set. When asked what advice they’d give to students, 2012 Arts & Sciences alumni advised students to be open-minded and to consider all possibilities for majors and careers. Practically, choosing a major that you love will also bring about better grades and higher levels of engagement with professors and academic scholarship. Academic achievement (or a solid GPA), research experience, and rich personal references are all beneficial when the time comes to apply for internships and jobs.

❖ **Consider a major that provides a foundation for areas you hope to continue studying in graduate school.**
  Liberal arts disciplines provide a strong foundation for many academic and professional graduate programs. For example, history majors take many relevant courses and offer a unique perspective for a variety of graduate programs, including government, law, business, and teaching. Anthropology majors may find that their understanding of cultural diversity and human biological evolution may lend well to graduate programs in urban planning, community development, law, or medicine. The knowledge of social inequality, social change, and cultural norms gained through sociology or women’s studies may provide a strong foundation for students considering graduate programs in politics, foreign affairs, non-profit management, or counseling.

❖ **Develop a marketable combination of liberal arts major with skill-based supplementary coursework.**
  You may want to consider creating a concentration of coursework in a marketable area that you can communicate to prospective employers. For example, you may indicate on a resume, "six hours coursework in accounting" or "extensive coursework in foreign language." Usually there are a variety of courses available to complement the field you have chosen. So, if you want to pursue a career in public relations (for which there is no undergraduate major at UVa), take ownership over creating that path by taking courses in English (writing), business (labor negotiation, e.g.), public speaking and politics.

There are both advantages and disadvantages to double majoring or declaring a minor. On the positive side, you may find that you are able to get into classes more readily. Having a double major may communicate academic perseverance to employers. You certainly can communicate your second concentration to employers without formally declaring a second major or minor. Remember that you are often doubling your requirements, which limits your curricular flexibility, opportunities to take career-related electives, and perhaps less time to explore experiential options.
Considering the Details

New college students need adequate information about all that a college has to offer, and they need to know the requirements of the different programs of study. Just reading through descriptions on SIS isn't enough, and for the majority, exposure to a few subjects in high school simply won't serve to introduce or to interpret the college curriculum. Before you can make a realistic decision about your major, you must take an informed look at all the possibilities.

Do you know:

- What preparatory courses are required?
- What's the minimum grade point average for acceptance into the major? (if applicable)
- How many courses/credits in the major are required to graduate?
- Are the course offerings sequential or non-sequential?
- If there is a required course, or courses, could they pose scheduling difficulties?
- Are the exams finite reasoning or essays?
- How much freedom is there for elective courses, for flexibility and creativity, and individual projects?
- Does the department offer coursework within your specific area(s) of interest?
- Are faculty members supportive, available, and responsive to students?
- What are graduates of the department doing now?

Go visit the departments you are considering and ask for any information packets that they might have for prospective majors. Talk with current students who have selected the major you are considering and perhaps sit in on a few classes to help you determine what a particular major may entail. Schedule an appointment with your association dean to help you talk through your choice of major in a broad sense. UCS counselors can then assist you with the career-related implications of any major you are considering.

Most importantly, remember that this decision is only one of many you will make throughout your academic and career path, and that being thoughtful and intentional about your decisions will allow you the time and freedom to explore your options.