

Choosing and Using Your Major



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I. Separating Myth from Reality

The "Major" Myth:

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!

The Realities:

The relationship of college majors to career fields varies. 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 (along with your activities, work, etc.) to make up the personal package that can enable you to become anything you want to be. Majors don't limit you to one type of work. In

a recent survey of 3,000 U.Va. Arts and Sciences alumni, 70% of the respondents indicated that there is little connection between their undergraduate major and current career. Although the connection between your specific academic major and career field may not be apparent, the transferable skills you gain as a student are 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 part 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. Furthermore, other factors such as your energy and enthusiasm, your goals, your experiences and your knowledge of and demonstrated interest in a career field play a large part in determining an employer's response to you.

II. Asking the Right Questions

Many students don't really know what they want to do for a career. College students always want to start a session with their adviser with the question, "What should I major in?" or "What can I do with a major in X?" But in order to answer those questions you first need to ask yourself, "Who do I want to be? What do I really want out of my life? What kind of person am I, so far? Where do I really want to go with myself?"

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.

UCS can help you focus on the broader career planning question of "What do I want to do?" This can lead you to explore yourself and career fields that provide opportunities for you to achieve what you want, not only from your college major, but from life as well. Several self-assessment tools, including written and computer-aided personality and interest inventories, are available to you at UCS for assistance with this essential step. In attempting to discover what **you** want to do, you'll find that the choice of an academic major takes on new meaning. You are no longer concerned with the prescribed route of specific majors. The search becomes one of finding the best academic program for **your** chosen career goals.

We can compare this process to map-making. **You actually begin to 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 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.

III. Liberal Arts Majors and Careers

It is important to understand how your choice of major may be independent of your career considerations. There are definite benefits to a liberal arts education. Many of us come to college seeking to expand our awareness of all that makes us human. Getting a job is important, but it is only part of what we hope to get from our education. A liberal arts education can offer the following benefits:

Personalized education. A liberal arts education enables students to learn through an interdisciplinary lens by exploring issues from socio-cultural, political, historical, economic, and philosophical perspectives. The flexibility, breadth, and depth of a liberal arts curriculum enables students to personalize their education. It provides opportunities for students to explore their unique learning interests, engage in individualized study and research, and connect academic coursework to diverse or specialized career interests.

Broadened global view. Liberal arts majors often gain an understanding of cultural traditions and heritage. A liberal arts education provides students with opportunities to explore their values and the value systems of others to gain an awareness of how culture influences individual and group behavior and decisions.

Generalist education. Many of us are generalists, by nature. We have many interests and enjoy synthesizing divergent ideas. The liberal arts curriculum is geared to the development of generalists. Indeed, it was founded on the notion that becoming a well-rounded generalist is the goal of education.

Transferable skills. Along with some of the above outcomes, liberal arts courses do develop important skills that can be **transferred** into the world of work. Liberal arts students have the opportunity to develop skills in:

- oral and written communication
- constructing and defending persuasive arguments
- problem-solving and critical thinking
- working with people
- cross-cultural understanding and respect for different historical traditions and perspectives
- analysis and research
- ethical decision-making
- visual design and media production
- computer knowledge

Many of these skills are the same ones that prospective employers have identified as skills they value and see as potentially relevant to almost any career. You might plan to take certain courses to strengthen a certain set of skills that you would like to market to an employer.

IV. Going Beyond Your Major

Liberal arts majors, in particular, need to offer employers more than their orientation as a generalist and their broadly-based transferable skills. They need to develop entry-level marketability and to demonstrate career field interest. Before they can become bank presidents, they must first get some job experience within the bank. **In most cases a college major alone is not sufficient for getting a job.** The increased number of college graduates has produced more competition in the job market.

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 becoming educated: summer or part-time work, intern/externships, volunteer experience, extracurricular activities, elective courses, and the like. Once in the field of your choice, you, as a well-educated person, can build your own career, but careful planning to get your foot in the door is required. To become competitive in today's market, you need the experience and competencies related to your chosen fields.

Internships, externships, part-time jobs, and extracurricular activities provide numerous opportunities for you to gain experience and develop the competencies required by your career choices. As a liberal arts student, you are faced with the challenging task of discovering better ways to compete in the employment market, increasing your awareness of employment options, and creating more links between your undergraduate experience and the world of work.

Increasingly, employers choose new hires from their pool of former interns. To be competitive, students must demonstrate the drive to gain career-related experience beyond that provided through academic coursework alone. 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 essential qualities sought by employers, such as leadership, interpersonal and communication skills.

Extracurricular activities have another fundamental purpose, however: self-exploration. Externing 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?" All kinds of beyond-the-classroom activities allow you to explore potential careers early enough to test perceptions of yourself against working-world realities. This way you will avoid premature commitment to a field you don't yet understand, or single-minded concentration on one area of knowledge to the exclusion of other areas not yet discovered.

V. Making Your Liberal Arts Degree Marketable

There are several factors that will determine to what extent your liberal arts degree is an advantage when you enter the job market.

- 1. The extent to which you supplement your degree with work experience and elective coursework to support your career goals.**

There are numerous examples of liberal arts students who have successfully marketed their degrees by offering relevant work experiences and demonstrated interest in their fields. An internship in personnel or marketing, part-time work in banking and retailing, and volunteer experience in the helping professions are examples. Directories and listings of internships, volunteer opportunities, and summer jobs are available in our Career Resource Library and through the UCS Web site. UCS can also help you secure an externship, or job shadowing, opportunity to observe an employer of choice during academic breaks. Don't forget about studying abroad opportunities to gain valuable language and cultural fluency if you are interested in international careers. When considering a business career, you should look into elective courses in the School of Commerce that are open to all students.

- 2. Your career plan.**

The liberal arts provide an excellent background for many professional options. Those who plan to enter a professional field where a graduate degree is required often find an undergraduate program in liberal arts allows them to develop perspective and to mature as a person before they specialize. Professional careers where this is possible and desirable include law, journalism, social work, counseling, educational administration, business, and medicine. However, plan ahead if you are considering these options because certain undergraduate courses may be prerequisites for graduate school or, if not required, may make graduate school less difficult. The UCS Career Resource Library and Web site (www.career.virginia.edu) have extensive resources on choosing and applying to graduate schools. You may also consult with the pre-professional staff in UCS if you plan to attend law or medical school. Students pursuing other professional schools – (i.e.: physical therapy) should also see pre-professional advisers.

- 3. Where you go to school.**

Degrees from very prestigious liberal arts schools such as the University of Virginia are very marketable. Alumni of such institutions provide excellent contacts and will often go out of their way to create opportunities. Refer to the UCS handout, "Networking and Informational Interviewing" for details on tapping the wealth of alumni contacts available to U.Va. students.

- 4. Whether or not you acquire technical skills to supplement your liberal arts education.**

A liberal arts student is one thing; a liberal arts student with a minor or a concentration in computer science or other technical expertise is another. There is no reason for liberal arts students to be technically illiterate. The broad perspective of a liberal arts education is powerful and highly marketable when used in combination with some solid technical skills.

Many options exist for those who do not see themselves as technical specialists. Forcing yourself into a technical field that you aren't suited for will only lead to unhappiness and probably failure. Don't confuse yourself by thinking you have to attain high-level skills in technical areas before you can communicate with specialists in the field. You don't have to major in engineering, computer science, economics, or finance. Coursework which enables you to develop skills in technical areas will suffice. For example, you may want to consider taking courses in accounting, marketing, finance, management, computer-related areas, public speaking, economics, news writing, etc.

VI. Strategies for Choosing a Major

With your personal "map" 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.**
Because most of us choose liberal arts hoping that we will profit as human beings, it makes sense to emphasize this factor. "What can this major contribute to my needs and development as a person? Will it offer me an opportunity to sort out my values or gain a broader view of the world? Will it help me to understand things I'm curious about in terms of people or society in general?" The majority of U.Va. CLAS alumni surveyed advised students to major in a field that was interesting to them. Adopting this strategy need not leave you in an unmarketable position as a graduating student if you combine it with the third strategy below.
- ❖ **Consider a major that provides a good background for the professional areas you hope to enter 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 a practical coursework concentration.**
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 computer-related areas." Usually there are a variety of courses available to complement the field you have chosen. A person wanting to pursue a career in public relations in a school with no such major could put together a program that included coursework in English (writing), business (labor negotiations and advertising), public speaking and other departments.

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 can limit your curriculum flexibility, opportunity to take career-related electives, and time to get hands on experience.

VII. Evaluating the Majors/Careers You Are Considering

New first-year 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 the catalog 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, which is a smorgasbord of specialization (and, often, of obscurity) by comparison. Before you can make a realistic decision about your major, you must take an informed look at all the possibilities.

The questions below should be considered when you evaluate a major. Departmental advisers and departmental handouts for prospective majors available through department offices should be the most help with any questions that are not answered in the course catalog.

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.