CAREER VISION

Major Decision: Choosing Your College Major

Unless you're one of those rare individuals who knew since you were a preschooler what you wanted to be when you grew up, choosing a college major may seem like a daunting task. You've probably heard over and over again that your uncertainty is perfectly normal. Once you're in college and take a few classes, you'll figure it all out. But, does that mean you should simply wait to see what happens? Of course not. After all, no matter how you choose your field of study (whether by happenstance or informed choice), *there will come a day when you must choose a direction.* With hundreds of possible undergraduate majors to choose from, it's never too early to start exploring your options.

About Majors & Minors

At most colleges, a bachelor's requires 120 credit hours of coursework, with an average semester course load of 15 credit hours. Your "major" is your main field of study. Typically, somewhere between 30 and 60 credit hours will be in coursework related to your major, depending upon both the major itself and the college's specific requirements. (*For more information about degree types and credit hour requirements*: Types of Colleges: The Basics.)

In addition to choosing your major, you may have options to:

- add a "minor" by taking four to eight courses in a field of study that's different than your major,
- double major or dual degree,
- or design your own major.

Some students choose a minor or second/dual major to complement their primary area of study (*e.g.,* a business major with an economics minor). Others select combinations to supplement their major, often with the goal of counterbalancing more specialized fields of study with those that offer more versatility in the job market (*e.g.,* a double major in foreign language and business).

Each of these options has its benefits.

- Complementary double majors or major / minor combinations may be easier to juggle due to some overlapping requirements.

- Supplementary combinations, on the other hand, provide an increased breadth of knowledge and "probably yield bigger gains in the job market," according Richard Pitt, Vanderbilt University associate professor who has conducted extensive research on the steady rise of the double major.

With so many combinations to choose from, it's important to **weigh your major / minor options in light of your goals.** After all, changing your major may mean you'll have to spend another semester or two in school, especially if your new major is unrelated to the one you selected initially. In order to reduce the risk of switching majors, some schools now group similar areas of study under a broader academic umbrella know as a "meta-majors". For example, University of Missouri, offers a *Numbers, Functions, and Technology* meta-major designed as a starting point for students with interests in math and computer science who are undecided about their specific career path.

Major Matters

Research by the consulting firm Robert Half shows that soft skills are becoming increasingly important for the future workplace. As such, some of the long-held beliefs about the "best majors" may be a bit outdated. In today's economy, workers need a *mix of technical and soft skills*. (*For more information:* Career Readiness: Competencies for a Career-Ready Workforce)

Therefore, now more than ever before, successful transition into your first job after college requires that your academic preparation:

- prepares you to do work that fits well with your talents and interests

  and

- enables you to develop and apply the **knowledge** and **skills** employers need.

Exploring Majors, Occupational Fields & Skills

After you've identified the occupational areas that may suit you, find out which fields of study can prepare you to reach your goals. There are several ways to explore majors, as described below. Use a multi-faceted approach to gather the information you need to choose your major wisely.

- **Read about occupations** of interest to you. Find out about the work tasks, education / training / degree requirements, and the skills required to do the job. You can access

profiles for more than 900 occupations through the U.S. Department of Labor's My Next Move, Occupational Outlook Handbook, O*NET, Career Outlook, and CareerOneStop.

Also, check your community college's library, the public library, and campus and other bookstores for information about careers and college majors. And listen to podcast and read articles and blogs about occupational fields of interest.

- **Talk to people.** When conducting informational interviews with professionals who work in careers of interest, be sure to ask about their career path, educational background, and the skills they use in their work.

- **Connect majors with occupations.** The University of Tennessee at Knoxville has an excellent online resource to help you with this task. You can research nearly 100 majors to learn about:
    - the associated occupations,
    - the types of employers that hire grads from these majors,
    - and the experience and skills employers look for when interviewing job applicants.

  (*For more information:* What Can I Do with this Major?; Linking college majors to careers.)

- **Investigate the coursework.** Access the college's undergraduate catalog online and read the course descriptions for the major(s) you're considering. Do the classes sound interesting to you? If so, the major *might* be right for you (assuming, of course, that it's a good fit with your goals).

  But, keep in mind that, while a class may be intriguing, *you have to pass it!* As you peruse the list of courses, do a **reality check.** Say, for example, you've struggled with passing every math class you've ever taken. Then a math-heavy major like physics might not be your best choice — even if that *Quantum and Thermal Physics* class sounds fascinating.

  On the flipside, what if most of the courses on the list seem interesting — *but one or two don't?* Should you rule out the major completely? Not necessarily, since *the course is not the career!* For instance, most nursing students must take *Organic Chemistry* as part of their curriculum. That's because nurses need to understand how

drugs affect the human body in order to administer medications properly. But, unlike some chemical engineers, nurses don't analyze the structure of carbon-containing compounds at work.

Take full advantage of **on-campus** opportunities to investigate occupations and majors:

- **Attend panel discussions and networking events** sponsored by the Career Services Office. You'll hear from and interact with professionals working in a variety of occupational fields. They'll share information about their educational background, work tasks, required skills, and career path.

- **Talk to alumni mentors** who work in careers of interest. Check with your college's Career Services Office to find out how you can to connect with alumni.

- **Meet with academic and departmental advisors** who can offer guidance about college majors and careers.

- **Actively engage in experiential learning activities** that provide opportunities to develop your technical and soft skills including:
    - on- and off-campus part-time jobs,
    - internships,
    - and assisting professors with research.

Major Decisions

When choosing an academic field of study, it's important to consider how you major, academic environment, and experiential learning activities will prepare you to transition into the world of work. Selecting a major that's a good fit takes time, energy, and effort. But, it's worth it. After all, it's an investment in your future!