



Why College Sophomores Panic

“My daughter is a college sophomore and needs to declare a major, but she has bounced from wanting to be an astronaut to film study to architecture. Can you help?” This type of plea from a concerned parent is not uncommon. This is the time of the *Sophomore Panic*.

Most colleges and universities encourage new students to explore their interests by taking a variety of classes. That exploration is great if it is a part of a plan to make a decision about educational and career goals. Without a plan the sheer number of undergraduate majors can be overwhelming to explore. For example, there are 130+ options at DePaul University, and 150+ at the University of Illinois. Too often students use “undeclared” as way to defer creating a plan and making a decision.

An academic major is a graduation requirement at most colleges and universities. Typically declared by the end of sophomore year, a major consists of a series of required and elective courses necessary to achieve a degree in a particular field. These related and often sequential courses are building blocks for internships in the field and career paths. Some students need to begin taking courses in their major during their first year of college in order to fulfill prerequisites for later courses in the sequence and graduate in four years. And even though a student is enrolled in a university, they may not be eligible for admission into different schools or departments where there is a lot of competition for a finite number of spots. A student transferring to another university may also lose credits because they are not recognized courses in the new school.

No parent likes to get that frantic phone call from their college student and feel helpless. If your student is in the heat of the moment, what are four tips you might offer your child to avoid *Sophomore Panic*?

1. First of all, keep calm and investigate your options.

Even though students may be required to register for fall semester classes in the preceding February or March, there is always a period of time when classes may be dropped and added without having to pay a late registration fee or forfeit any paid tuition and fees. This flexibility can extend until the first week or two after the semester begins. Check out specific policies and dates in effect on your campus in the college catalog or with the Registrar’s Office or its web page.



CAREER VISION

2. Register for classes that complete your Gen Ed requirements.

In order to provide students with a broad exposure to many disciplines, and not just specialized courses in their major field, colleges require a certain number of core courses referred to as General Education requirements. Liberal arts courses in the humanities, languages, and natural, social and behavioral sciences give students practice in critical and analytical thinking, research and writing. To buy time to decide on a major, take classes to finish your Gen Eds. Keep in mind, however, that this strategy works best early in your college career, as some majors may have different Gen Ed requirements. For example, a bachelor of science degree may require two lab sciences whereas a bachelor of arts may require only one.

3. Make the choice of a major and a career direction a priority.

It is never too late. The secret is [backwards planning](#) – pick the career direction first, then the major. Then the plan falls into place more quickly. Students can participate in a comprehensive career assessment that includes aptitudes, interests, values and personality. Once careers are identified that are a good fit for the individual, exploration activities like informational interviewing and job shadowing can be efficient and focused. After gathering this information, students can evaluate their career options, make their decision, and put a plan into place for achieving their exciting goal. While some careers require a specific major, like nursing, other careers can be entered via several different, but career-related, majors. An example might be an entry-level marketing position for which a marketing, advertising, business or mass communications major may all be considered good academic preparation. Students who know their career goal can select among those majors the one that they feel best prepares them for entry into that field. Remember, college is not a career choice.

4. Call in an expert.

Tuition doesn't just buy students the ability to take courses; it gives them access to a range of support services at their school. The career services center, faculty advisors, internship and service-learning coordinators, career or major fairs, leadership opportunities, and student organizations can assist with career exploration activities and decision-making help. Families can also seek out career services providers that specialize in working with students. A comprehensive career assessment, with results interpreted by a credential career professional, can provide clarity for a student more quickly and illuminate the complex process of career decision-making.