

Major Decisions: How to Pick Your Major In College

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More than two out of every three undergraduates at this University change majors between the time they are accepted and the time they graduate. A good number change two or three times. Any decision that has so many students second-guessing must be tricky, and it is.

The subjects are unknown ...

The difficulties come from several directions. First, there are so many options that you had no opportunity to sample in high school. Everyone has some experience studying literature, mathematics, French and physics, but no high school in the country offers electrical engineering. Nor can you get a running start in microbiology or finance or metallurgy or philosophy. More than half of the disciplines we offer are new to you. So how can you have a responsibly cultivate preference early enough to select one as your principal interest here?

The choice is pressured ...

Another difficulty is pressure. Some students get pretty clear advice from their parents about what a sensible major would be. Most of that advice tends to have something to do with earning a living after college. And much of it is bad advice.

In the old days there were parents who threatened to cut off tuition money unless their child studied the subject they thought was right. That rarely happens today, but there is another kind of pressure that may be worse. There are few students at Notre Dame whose parents didn't make sacrifices for them to be here. And most students are backed by parents who didn't have, or weren't free to accept, the kind of education they worked hard to provide their children. The result: Most people on this campus walk around with an abiding and compelling sense of gratitude to their parents.

For every student here whose parents have told him what to study, there are a hundred whose parents never breathed a word of instruction on the matter. But most of those hundred, in the privacy of their hearts, want to make a choice that will satisfy their parents. They are drawn to major in subjects their parents can see as oriented towards a useful future. One somehow feels it would be ungrateful to receive a first-rate university education and not put it to maximum use from the start. That is a more insidious and damaging form of pressure precisely because there is nothing the parents can do to change it. They had nothing to do with imposing it.

In addition, high school counselors often talk to seniors in a way that is excessively career oriented. They make the student aware, even before she sets foot on a college campus, that she is going to higher studies with an eye towards an eventual profession or job. The message is that it is wasteful to spend four years without any clear idea of where all that expensive study is leading.

The "competition" is strong ...

Students also have a tendency, especially in their early years at college, to feel crowded by competition. Most freshmen look up and down the corridor the first week they're here and feel intimidated. Everyone they encounter seems to have been a valedictorian, student council president, all-state breast-stroke champion, National Merit finalist, congressional intern and published poet.

I exaggerate, of course, but most people here are used to being at the head of the line. That is how you got here. Now you are at a place with a lot of others who were at the head of their lines, and there just isn't room for all of you at the top of this class. So you tend to figure that your choice of study here will have to be canny and careful if it's going to make you competitive with such bright and aggressive classmates.

After a few years you discover everyone else is as normal as you, but by then you've begun to worry that since Notre Dame accepted you it must be a second-rate institution. There are all those other more talented people out there at better places who, when they emerge, are going to have a running start on you. So your choice of what to study is fretful because you have these other, more quick-witted people to compete with.

Those are three difficulties that most of you have to cope with: the subjects are so unknown, the choice is so pressured, and the competition is so strong. Unfortunately these difficulties cause students to stumble into a few classical misunderstandings, which in turn lead them to wrong decisions about their major.

Confusing education with training ...

The first misunderstanding is to confuse education with training. An institution that offers you training is trying to provide you with the information and skills you need for a specific career. A law school must acquaint you with how to interview clients, how to plead before a court, and how to draw up proper legal documents. A welding academy will teach you the materials and methods of that trade. Advanced training in computing will prepare you not simply to keypunch or to program, but to create software, to understand the mysteries of central processing, and then to grasp the theoretical underpinnings of applied mathematics.

All of that is training: specific knowledge needed for specific professional or skilled work. It is not education.

Education is the opportunity, through studying a variety of subjects, to gain the information and the dexterity to use your wits and your expression. Education prepares you to be someone more than to do something. Education is what prepares you to hear more when you listen, to reach deeper when you think, to say more when you speak.

Education is quite different from training, which prepares you in advance to do the tasks that are well known in a given job. Education prepares you in advance to see beneath and beyond what is well known. The principal value that an educated person brings to her career is intelligence. What one wants of an educated person, beyond his skills, is the ability to see into problems that

cannot be foreseen. A welder must know in advance all the techniques he has to use, but a banker or a physician or a teacher or a member of the city council is expected to move beyond previous experience and apply his wits to the heart of new problems.

A good university such as this one will give you quite a few skills and a broad grounding of information. But we do not exist to teach skills to undergraduates; we do that in our graduate and professional programs. The result of a college education should be a person whose mind is enlivened and whose imagination is limber. John Alexander Smith, an Oxford man, put it this way:

"Gentlemen: You are now about to embark upon a course of studies which will occupy you for several years. Together they form a noble adventure. But I would like to remind you of an important point. Some of you, when you go down from the University, will go into the Church, or to the Bar, or to the House of Commons, or to the Home Civil Service, to the Indian or Colonial Services, or into various professions. Some may go into the Army, some into industry and commerce, some may become country gentlemen. A few--I hope very few--will become teachers or dons.

"Let me make this clear to you. Except for the last category, nothing that you will learn in the course of your studies will be the slightest possible use to you in after life, save only this: that if you work hard and intelligently you should be able to detect when a man is talking rot, and that in my view is the main, if not the sole, purpose of education."

People fortunate and qualified enough to receive a university education will make their living by their wits. You will serve less by what you have learned than by what you can learn.

Choosing a major is not choosing a career ...

The good thing about education is that it matters hardly at all what subjects you choose to study. You can be educated in any discipline, because there is no direct connection between an educational subject and a specific career. So never ask what you can do with your major.

This touches on the second classical misunderstanding that has led so many students astray. The choice of a major is not the choice of a career. Undergraduates are not making lifetime decisions. When they imagine they are, it can be paralyzing.

Let me say a bit more about that. Some talents show themselves early in life. If you are an excellent athlete, you already have the coordination and stamina and pleasure from sports in your early teens. Nobody suddenly develops into a star athlete in her 30s. The same is true for mathematical ability. If you are good at quantitative understanding, you are already good at it in junior high school; in fact, you tend towards high achievement in math and other related subjects. You know science is your strong suit, and you come to college aware that you will study science and excel in it.

Then things go wrong. Physics will begin to bore some of you. You will conceal from your parents that you signed up for a few extra theology courses, and you'll write poetry by flashlight under the covers at night. You may plug on and earn good grades, but with less and less appetite.

It is disconcerting to develop a new range of interests when your track record of achievement and satisfaction is so definitely in another direction. But that is what happens when a new range of talent begins to mature and to rival other talents that had declared themselves earlier. No one tells you in advance that philosophical thinking matures later than mathematical thinking. The choice of a major needs to be slowed down to allow you to get confirmation of your emergent strong interests and abilities.

But even then, near the close of your sophomore year, you are only choosing a major, not a career. Still more developments and experiences will come. Fixing on a lifetime career when you are a sophomore in college is like getting engaged at 14.

What you study here may have little necessary connection with what you will do later. We give baccalaureate degrees in about 40 disciplines and in many combinations of subjects. But people graduate in philosophy and end up lawyers. They study mechanical engineering and end up as business executives. They get degrees in English and go to medical school, do art history and run the family business, choose chemistry and go into politics. They major in sociology and become priests. They finish in accounting with their CPAS and choose to be homemakers and mothers.

Even if they emerge from a program most students would consider a direct pipeline to a specific profession--architecture, for example--they are really much more free than you would suppose. Do you know how many people with degrees in architecture practice architecture? About half. So consider yourself enhanced, rather than caught, by what you choose to study. You are not making a lifetime decision, you are making a decision for the next two or three years ...or until you change that decision.

This is not to say that there should be no natural growth from study to career. It does imply, however, that educated people have such enormous advantage and versatility that they retain a basic freedom to do whatever they please in life. To have graduated in any discipline that Notre Dame offers in no way forecloses career possibilities. It has become increasingly the case that you will enter a career which requires or provides specific training. About 60 to 70 percent of you will go on to graduate or professional schools; others to corporate training programs. Do not suffer a failure of nerve by imagining that you are more attractive to employers, if you have more advanced professional training. For then you will forfeit the unrepeatably and more valuable opportunity to get an education first.

You have talents that will be enormously attractive to employers; talents so superior that you are free to make your living by your wits, your versatility of understanding, your imagination. Don't double-think the future.

Select what you want to study ...

The temptation is to figure out your career and then choose the studies that lead up to it. That is exactly the wrong way round. You are not ready to choose a career, except in the most tentative and speculative way. You are barely ready to choose a major. Select what you want to study with the belief that it will lead you to the point of deciding well, not quite your career, but what you will do after graduation.

What educates you best is not what you figure will lead somewhere, but what you now believe will give you most enjoyment. Pick your major on the pleasure principle, for what you most enjoy studying will draw your mind in the liveliest way to being educated.

If you want to study medieval history, don't fret about what you can do with it. You are not at a trade school. If you want to study marketing, do it because you find marketing the most fascinating subject we offer. If you came to Notre Dame determined to become a physician but in your freshman year you couldn't stand math and you failed chemistry and you threw up over your laboratory frog, there's a message there. It's not that you are incapable of becoming a doctor, but that the kind of disciplines that govern a doctor's work do not really appeal to your appetite. If in the meantime drama has caught your eye, then make that your choice and let the future handle itself. Or, more accurately, let it help you to become more qualified to determine the future. If throughout the course of four years you progressively follow your intellectual nose into what fascinates you most, when you emerge you will be in a much wiser position to choose the threshold of the proper career than you were at the start.

In the meantime don't feel pushed to make the decision prematurely. Our curriculum is versatile enough that the decision can be reviewed and postponed and changed. I am not arguing for indecision or instability. I am merely pleading for a sense of freedom, a certain responsible recklessness about study, that too many students feel guilty about having.

Pleasure and fascination ...

Let me put it this way. Imagine you are told now that on graduation day you will die. It will be painless and gentle; you will slowly and beautifully fade, right here on the main quad, with family and roommates gathered round, the Glee Club singing under the trees, and Father Hesburgh giving you a potent final blessing. Knowing of your death now--realizing that whatever your major is it can never lead you into a career but will be only for your pleasure and fascination--would it make any difference what you choose to study in the interim? If it would, then you ought to change. Ironically, what you then choose will lead you, by steady and proper pacing, into the most reliable future.

It is essential to realize that any major can lead to any career, and that the best major is the one you choose with no look out of the corner of your eye to where it will lead.

Once that is cleared up, the difficulties are less difficult. Yes, most of the majors possible here are subjects you cannot have studied before. So use the first and especially the second year to explore. Use the freedom the curriculum provides. Far too many men and women graduate from here and come to this regret: if they had it to do over again, or had had the nerve earlier, they would study another subject.

Parental pressures, revisited ...

As for the pressure from parents whose approval you seek, remember: if you are mature enough to undertake university studies, you have to be mature enough to choose those studies. You might choose unwisely, but it should be your choice.

Parents who virtually demand what their children will study at college are misguided and, fortunately, rare. I think parents ought to have the freedom to suggest or lobby for a choice of major, but you take away your parents' freedom if you transform their cue into a command. Parents ought to be able to promote an idea without children complaining they are being forced or browbeaten. If your parents do suggest a course of study, give it serious thought, but don't pretend you owe it to them to follow their recommendation.

And don't get up a guilt if you choose another major; because you may in fact be trying to make them feel guilty for something they never did.

And if you feel tempted to make a curriculum choice to gain your parents' respect: don't. If you have anything to be grateful for, it is that your parents have wanted you to get the best education within your reach and theirs, precisely so that you could and would make these kind of decisions responsibly for your own satisfaction. If they didn't want you to develop independent judgment they would have kept you home.

Competition, revisited ...

How can you choose your major to sidestep most of the rush-hour traffic of competition? By ignoring competition. Only about 40 percent of your fellow Americans manage to enroll in college, and only about half of those graduate. Virtually all of you at this University will complete your degree requirements. That puts you among the top fifth of all people your age. And among that 20 percent, only the most highly qualified are competitive for admission to a university like Notre Dame, which means you have educational opportunities that rank you among the top one or two percent in the country.

It makes one feel uneasy to hear such talk of exclusiveness, but these are simple facts. So when you get uneasy because everyone in the corridor seems pretty swift of mind: calm down. You are moving among classmates who have the same advantaged education you have, who have been sieved through highly selective admission processes. After a while they may begin to look ordinary enough, but they aren't. And you aren't. The older one gets and the more experience one accumulates, the more clear it becomes that the number of really quick-minded people is small. You wonder how the world gets by with so few. Rather than imagining yourself as part of a large, capable crowd trying to crush through a narrow doorway of opportunity, it is more realistic to understand you are advantaged to an embarrassing degree, and there aren't nearly enough of you to go around.

Self-knowledge is essential ...

To select a major program of study wisely you need not figure out what other people want of you. You need to figure out what you want. And that's not easy. It requires much self-knowledge.

But that is both what education gives and what education requires. William Johnson Cory, a Cambridge man, expressed impatience when critics complained that English schools were offering an education that was not useful enough. Education was not supposed to be useful, he retorted.

"You are not engaged so much in acquiring knowledge as in making mental efforts under criticism," he continued. A certain amount of knowledge you can indeed with average faculties acquire so as to retain; nor need you regret the hours that you spent on much that is forgotten, for the shadow of lost knowledge at least protects you from many illusions.

"But you go to a great school, not for knowledge so much as for arts and habits; for the habit of attention, for the art of expression, for the art of assuming at a moment's notice a new intellectual posture, for the art of entering quickly into another person's thoughts, for the habit of submitting to censure and refutation, for the art of indicating assent or dissent in graduated terms, for the habit of regarding minute points of accuracy, for the habit of working out what is possible in a given time, for taste, for discrimination, for mental courage and mental soberness.

"Above all, you go to a great school for self-knowledge."

There are crucial freedoms that others can neither keep from us nor give to us. We must take possession of them ourselves. The sense of freedom that leads one to follow his or her own sensible instincts into a major course of study, confident that if one does that, then--and only then--will one be ready to make other even more crucial decisions: that is the sense of freedom I urge upon you before it is too late, and even before it is too early. Go ahead.

Expand your academic horizons ...

And after you have made your choice, remember that your major is only a minor portion of your higher education. You are invited--prodded--to surround and enliven your mind with elective courses. Relish them. The instructors in your discipline believe that you can never study enough of it, and some of us would advise you to take every elective our discipline has to offer. That is because we hanker to have our students love what we love, and this tempts us to tempt you to forego your education and begin training in our field. Instead, browse in the clover.

When I was an undergraduate in philosophy, we were directed to read only primary sources: only the great thinkers, not the secondary folks who wrote textbooks about them. Excellent. But in retrospect, the good times were the hundreds of hours when I got lost in the stacks of the library and read my fascinated way through an education that no one had planned, but was lavishly provided.

Your duty is to enjoy. Nothing you might do could be more useful.