

How to Choose Your Major

By Mary Lou Taylor

If you are wondering what to major in and are asking “What can I do with a major in this?” you’re not alone. This is a question frequently asked by undeclared students and is one of many factors that can get in the way of major and career choice. But while this question may seem to be the most logical one to ask, answers for many majors may be difficult to find. Why is this?

Why You Don’t Know What to Do With a Major in Philosophy

Most of you are attending college because you believe it will lead you to better employment. Your journey to better employment is a journey of many choices including choice of college, choice of major, and choice of courses.

Notice that none of these choices mention the word “career.” Since careers are related to employment, simple logic suggests that if you are attending college to obtain better employment, there should be a relationship between majors and careers. While it’s true that some majors, such as education or nursing, do relate to specific careers, most majors do not. In fact, the majority of majors will actually help prepare you for many career possibilities.

What’s a Major For?

Majors are part of the process that leads to earning a degree. They are designed for academic purposes rather than for career purposes. This is why the link between many majors and specific career fields is often unclear. Once you recognize this, you can begin asking questions that do have clear answers.

Which Comes First—Major or Career?

Begin by identifying your specific decision-making goal. Different students prefer different starting points, and different starting points will suggest different questions. Where do you wish to begin? Do you want to choose a major first and identify career possibilities later, or choose a few career options and then identify majors that can help you get there?

- **You’re already an expert decision maker, but may not be aware of it:** Think of an important decision you have made recently, such as deciding on a specific college or making a significant purchase. The steps to making a major decision follow a basic decision-making/problem-solving process that you have used many times.
- **It’s a good investment of your time:** If you want the decision-making process to yield meaningful results, you must be willing to invest some time, thought, and effort. It’s like a treasure hunt. You collect clues, in this case information, then piece together the clues to form a map to guide you on your journey toward an appropriate major and meaningful career.
- **Your career center can help:** Career counselors can help you identify both major and career options that suit your specific desires, needs, and goals and offer you the possibility of career satisfaction. One way they do this is by showing you how to use a four-step decision-making process.

Steps to a Major Decision

Step 1: Assess Yourself

Your first step is to do some self-assessment. The more you understand yourself, the clearer your life goals and the way to reach them will become. Asking yourself the following questions will give you some important clues:

- What do you truly enjoy? Consider the classes and activities that you have liked the best. What did they involve? Why did you enjoy them? There are careers related to every interest you have!
- What are you good at? Identify your skills and abilities. What types of things do you seem to do well? Are they technical...adventurous...intellectual?
- What is really important to you? Is enjoying your work more important than prestige? Is creativity more important than security? You want your choice to be compatible with your values.
- What is the coolest job you can imagine? Describe it as specifically as you can. Try to locate and contact one or two people in this area and ask them how they got there.
- Ask your career center staff what assessments they offer. These can help you discover more about yourself.

Step 2: Gather Information and Explore Options

- Examine the majors available to you in your school's catalog. Make a list of your options and eliminate those that don't interest you. Read about the majors remaining on your list. Mark the courses in each major that most interest you, match your abilities, and share your values. This should help you further shorten your list.
- Review additional information about the majors on your short list. Visit each department's web pages, or read print materials they offer. Talk with an academic adviser, students currently in these majors, and faculty members.
- Visit your career center's resource center. What is available? Does the career center offer a workshop in choosing a major? Talk with a career counselor. The more information you find, the more informed your final decision will be.

Step 3: Evaluate and Make Your Major Decision

- It's time to put together the information you have collected. Consider what you have learned. Weigh the pros and cons of each option. If you haven't already, narrow your list down to two or three majors.
- Consider the feasibility of a second major or making one of your options your minor. Does your institution offer what is often called an interdisciplinary major or minor? This is a major or minor you create yourself within prescribed parameters. It allows you to take classes selected from different departments that share some theme or career goal.
- If you are still having difficulty deciding, talk with an adviser or career counselor who can help you evaluate the information you have collected, suggest additional resources, and guide you through the decision-making process.

Step 4: Take Action

- Sample courses in the majors you are considering.
- Choose student activities, internships, volunteer work, and/or part-time employment that can help you further develop your skills in areas that interest you.
- Talk to people who work in the career fields you are considering. Ask about their major and how it helped them. If your school has an alumni network program, this can be an excellent resource for learning more about the realities of specific career fields.
- Go for it! Declare your major.

Your Journey Begins

Your journey to better employment via a college degree is a journey of many choices. These steps for making a major decision offer you a map for an important part of this journey. Bon voyage!

Many factors can get in the way of your being able to make a major or career choice. Some of the most common are listed below.

External Factors

External factors are not personal and are easier to manage than internal factors.

- **Unrelated-ness of majors and careers:** Understanding that majors and careers have developed independently of each other will help you avoid becoming stuck wondering what you can do with a particular major.
- **Lack of information:** Often you just don't have enough information to be comfortable making a decision. You have had very little opportunity up to this point to learn about different majors and careers. Your career center is an excellent place to begin. If you're more independent-minded, begin researching on your own.
- **Too much information:** This is particularly true since the advent of the World Wide Web. A huge amount of information is available, and it's easy to become overwhelmed. Don't give up: You can learn how to quickly and efficiently find good, accurate information on the web, and your career center can help.

Internal Factors

Internal factors are more personal. Sometimes these concerns need to be addressed before the decision-making process can be completed.

- **Lack of self-confidence:** If your choice of a major or career seems especially critical, you may not feel confident in your ability to make a good decision. Often, obtaining additional information can solve this problem. Other times, more counseling may be needed.
- **Fear/anxiety:** While a little anxiety is positive and can help you stay on your toes, too much can wear you down. Fearing that you will make "bad" decisions can paralyze you. A career counselor can help you separate your rational from irrational fears.
- **Conflicting values:** You may be considering paths that are not compatible with each other. Perhaps you want to earn a good salary but also want to work in the not-for-profit sector. Or perhaps you would love to work as a performer and but also need job security. Doing some values clarification work may help you here.
- **Conflict with others:** Parents, spouses, and significant others often have definite ideas about your career choice. Desiring to please others and the need for continued financial support are two ways significant others can put undue pressure on you. A career counselor may be able to help you identify ways to deal with this.
- **Multi-potentiality:** If you have many interests and many abilities, your problem may be one of narrowing down options rather than creating them. Once again, a career counselor can help you find appropriate criteria for narrowing down your options.