

# How to Choose Your Major ...or Not

BY **CLAIRE CARTER**

The Ohio State University offers more than 200 majors, plus hundreds of minors and specializations. The University of Michigan has almost 250 areas of study. Montclair State University boasts nearly 300 majors, minors, and concentrations. And you thought you had trouble choosing your burrito filling at Chipotle!

**D**eciding on a major may seem even more difficult if you have no idea what you want to study. But the good news is you don't have to decide right away.

It's perfectly okay to take some time—years, even—to self-reflect, explore your interests, change your mind, and start all over again. In fact, that kind of exploration is encouraged by many colleges and universities.

If you're not sure what you want to major in, here's how to get the ball rolling.

## Assess yourself

"The key is to not rush into any decision about majors," says Randall Hansen, author of *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Choosing a College Major*. "Students should take time for some detailed self-assessment."

You can start by jotting down honest answers about the following:

## Favorite high school classes

"Not the easiest or the ones with the best teachers," Hansen says, "but the ones in which the subject really excited you and made you want to learn more." What classes do you truly enjoy? Your love of math could translate to a Business or Computer Science major, while physical education may lead to Kinesiology or Community Health.

At the same time, think about what classes your high school doesn't offer. Is there a subject you've always wanted to learn more about—a foreign language, a branch of history, an art

medium—but never had the chance to? You can find out if you're really interested by taking electives in college. These are classes you get to take out of pure interest, and they allow you to earn credit toward your eventual degree. Exploring uncharted academic areas could even lead you to your ideal major.

### **Skills and interests**

What do you excel at in and out of the classroom, and more importantly, do you actually enjoy it? Students shouldn't choose their major solely based on "what they might have been told they 'are good at,'" says Beth Howard, Associate Dean, Academic Advising Center at the University of Utah. Your friends may go straight to you whenever they need help editing an essay, but if doing that for a living doesn't excite you, then you shouldn't feel pressured to major in something like Journalism or English.

### **Hobbies and extracurriculars**

What do you like to do in your free time? Look for any running themes when you make your list, like helping others or attention to detail, Hansen says. For instance, a penchant for volunteer work may compel you to pursue a variety of majors, from Nursing to Sociology to Veterinary Science. Which leads to another consideration...

### **Personality and preferences**

If you can't stand the sight of blood, you shouldn't go into nursing. If you don't really like dogs, you probably don't want to be a vet. This is common sense, but it's important to think about what kind of person you are and how it will affect your choice of major. Are you an introvert? Extrovert? Pragmatic? Artistic? You'll be a lot happier and able to put forth your best work when you're comfortable with what your courses and future career ask of you.

### **Degrees and time frames**

So many choices—associate, bachelor's, master's, arts, science, dual,

## **Not Your Average College Majors**

BY EMILY MCKEON AND KARA E. JOYCE

Check out these weird, fun, not your grandma's college majors you can find at schools across the country.

### **Adventure Education at Green Mountain College**

Focusing on outdoor survival skills and wilderness tour guiding, this major is more than just advanced camping. Students earn certifications and take medical courses to ensure they can keep tourists safe.

### **Fermentation Sciences at Appalachian State University**

This major is literally beer and how it's made. But it's no joke—it involves a ton of science and financial studies.

### **Mortuary Science at the University of the District of Columbia Community College**

Not exactly a conversation starter, this major entails learning how to properly care for the deceased.

### **Packaging at Michigan State University**

Focusing on the functionality and environmental impact of the packaging industry, this area of study is offered as a BS, an MS (with online courses available)—and believe it or not—a PhD.

### **Paper Engineering at Western Michigan University**

This major is pretty much what it sounds like. It covers the route from tree to paper but includes a lot more science than you'd think!

### **Snow Science at Montana State University**

This major is just about snow—what it's made of, how much falls and where, and the effects it has on ecological environments.

### **Turfgrass Science at Texas A&M University**

Part of the Soil & Crop Sciences Department, this major focuses on studying the environmental production and economic profit of soil and grass.

### **Viticulture and Enology at the University of California, Davis**

This major involves the study of wine, but it's not just grapes. It also requires plenty of science and business classes.

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doctoral, professional—so little time! What degree do you hope to obtain, and how many years you are willing (or able) to commit to earning it? Most programs take four years to complete, but many need to be bolstered by grad or med school if you wish to work in a certain field.

### **Work and values**

Although choosing a major isn't the same as choosing a career, considering your professional goals can guide you toward certain academic areas.

"Try to think about what you might like to be doing 10 years down the road," says Howard. "This can be daunting for some students, so I try to guide them to think as broadly

as possible: Do you see yourself working 40 hours a week? Are you in an office or outside? Are you traveling regularly for work?"

Career research, job shadowing, and informational interviews can also offer valuable insight. Hansen encourages students to talk to family, friends, and professionals to "get an idea of the types of careers that are out there and what they entail—and whether any of them spark something within you."

Following a family tradition or pursuing a more profitable field may weigh heavily as you try to choose a major. But if you don't enjoy the subject you commit to studying, you'll have bigger problems than the one you face right now.



"Many students get pressure from family to choose a certain major, and then these students struggle for years before breaking free or dropping out," Hansen says. "The most important factor in choosing a major is doing so for yourself and not others." You are the one who has to live with the choice, so you should pick a major you're passionate about—"one that you can see loving for years and years." Unless, of course, you change your mind...but more on that in a second.

### Explore your options

Still not sure what that passion is? You're not alone. "Nearly 80% of first-year students are undecided in their major of choice," says Allison Logan, Assistant Dean of the Center for Exploratory Studies at the University of Cincinnati. And you may not figure it out for a while. "Nearly 75% of all college students will change their major once or twice in their academic career," she adds.

If you have a college already in mind, browsing its course catalog can help lay out your choices in black and white. They are usually available online and include everything a school has to offer: types of degrees, academic divisions, departments, majors, minors, concentrations, courses, and more.

Granted, this is a lot of information to take in, and you may feel even more overwhelmed after looking at all your choices. But schools understand and want to help! Because so many students enroll without choosing a major, many colleges and universities have developed special programs to simplify the decision-making process. Classes, centers/offices, and other "exploratory" resources can help students investigate their academic options and stay on track to graduate on time.

"Exploratory Studies is one of the largest 'majors' at UC," says Logan. "You can't graduate from Exploratory Studies, but many of our students will use our services at one point or another in their undergradu-

ate career." More than 5,000 students university-wide take advantage of the Center each academic year, she says.

The University of Cincinnati provides students with free assessments through MyPlan, an online testing service that takes personal preferences into account to help students find major and career matches. An elective course called Discovering UC is also offered, which introduces students to the school's 125+ majors through faculty presentations.

Similarly, the Major Exploration Program at the University of Utah offers a number of services to help students choose from the school's 80+ majors. These include one-on-one appointments, class presentations, newsletters, an open house series, a major exploration course, and events like the annual Major Exploration EXPO, which showcases hundreds of department offerings to current and prospective students.

Julia Vincent, Director of the Major Exploration Program, says these types of programs are critical to help students navigate their many options, especially at big state schools like the University of Utah. "Exploring students can sometimes feel lost at a large university," she says. "Our office and our programs can help the student find the right academic fit while also providing a home and community for them."

Your future campus will have similar services to help you pick your best-fit major, so make sure to seek them out and take advantage if you need them. "There may be majors offered at an institution that students never even considered or never even knew existed before," says Logan. "Take some time and explore what your institution has to offer you."

### Don't sweat it

You may still have some lingering worries in the back of your mind if you go into your first year of college with no major. If that's the case, here's what you need to know:

### Will I graduate on time if I wait to declare my major?

"We try and take a very organized and proactive approach to major exploration so that students can still progress through their degree while they explore," says Vincent. "Of course, some degrees can take longer to complete than four years, but that is true for both 'decided' and 'undecided' students. Exploring students are no further behind."


### Will this major land me a job?

"The big joke at most colleges is, 'What practical use is a Philosophy major?'" Hansen says. "But in reality, a major is just one small part of what makes you attractive to employers after college." Gaining real-world skills and references outside the classroom through internships, volunteer work, and networking are often more essential to securing a job after graduation.

Howard agrees that skill sets and experiences influence future success more than a specific major. "Even for medical school, it is your performance in a limited number of science courses—biology, chemistry, physics, math—in combination with a demonstrated commitment to and understanding of the profession that makes a big difference," she explains.

### What if I make the wrong choice?

Every experience—good or bad—can be helpful in your quest to find your major. "Even if the student discovers they don't like a particular field after all, it can be beneficial to the decision-making process," says Howard. If it's too late to switch, remember your major does not seal your fate, and a degree in any major will open doors to many different professional fields.

Bottom line: don't worry! You'll eventually find the major that's right for you, and then the real fun will start. After all, Hansen says, "Choosing a major is not the end of the process, but the beginning." 

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