



“But I don’t know what I want to do”

Choosing a major

One decision that troubles many students in higher education is the choice of an academic major. Here is an opportunity to apply your skills of critical thinking, decision making, and problem solving. The following suggestions can guide you through this process.

Link choosing a major to getting what you want

Your choice of a major can fall into place once you determine what you want in life. Before you choose a major, back up to a bigger picture. List your core values, such as contribution to society; wealth, recognition, health, or fun. Also write goals for what you want to accomplish in 5 years, 10 years, or even 50 years from today. After doing these things, choosing a major can seem like a piece of cake.

Many students find that the prospect of getting what they want in life is what justifies all the time, money, and day-to-day effort invested in going to school. Having a major gives you a powerful incentive for attending classes, taking part in discussions, reading textbooks, writing papers, and completing other assignments. When you see a clear connection between completing school and creating the life of your dreams, then the daily tasks of higher education become charged with meaning.

Studies indicate that the biggest factor associated with finishing a degree in higher education is a commitment to personal goals.³ A choice of major is one of those goals, and selecting the appropriate courses to complete your major is a form of planning that directly promotes your success.

Your career goals can have a big impact on your choice of major. For an overview of this topic and an immediate chance to put ideas on paper, see “Career planning: Begin the process now” in Chapter Nine.

Just choose, now

Don’t delay in experiencing the benefits of choosing a major. Even if you say that you’re undecided right now, you probably know a lot about what your major’s going to be.

To verify this, do a short experiment. Search your school’s catalog, online or in print, for a list of available majors. Read through the list two or three times. Then pretend that you have to choose a major today. Write down the first three ideas that come to mind.

Hold on to this list, which reflects your intuition or “gut wisdom~” as you perform the more intellectual task of researching various majors and careers in detail. Your research may lead to a new choice of major—or it may simply confirm one of the majors on your original list.

Test your trial choice

When you’ve made a trial choice of major, take on the role of a scientist. Treat your choice as a hypothesis and then design a series of experiments to test it. For example, try the following:

- Study your school’s list of required courses for this major, looking for a fit with your interests and long term goals.

- Visit with instructors who teach courses in the major and ask them about required course work and career options in the field.
- Discuss your trial choice with an academic advisor or career counselor.
- Enroll in a course related to your possible major.
- Find a volunteer experience, internship, part-time job, or service learning experience related to the major.
- Meet informally with students who have declared the same major.
- Interview someone who works in a field related to the major.

If these experiences confirm your choice of major, celebrate that fact. If they result in choosing a new major, celebrate that outcome as well.

Ask other people for ideas

Other people might have valuable suggestions about a choice of major or career for you. Ask key people in your life for their ideas and listen with an open mind.

At the same time, resist any pressure from family members or friends to choose a major or career that fails to interest you. People define success in different ways. Someone else's definition might not agree with yours. If you choose a career based solely on other people's expectations, you could end up with a job you don't enjoy—and a major barrier to your life satisfaction.

Learn more about yourself

Choosing a major can be more effective when you begin from a basis of self-knowledge. As you learn about your passions and potentials, in your current job and while in school, let your choice of a major reflect that ongoing discovery.

The exercises and Journal Entries in this book are a starting place. As you complete them, look for insights that bear on your choice of major.

Another path to self-knowledge includes questionnaires or inventories that are designed to correlate your interests with specific career choices. Your academic advisor or someone at your school's career planning and job placement office can give you more details about these inventories. You might wish to take several of them and meet with an advisor to interpret the results.

From *Master Student to Master Employee*, Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006

Remember that no questionnaire, inventory, test, or other tool can tell you exactly what career to choose or what goals to set for the rest of your life. Likewise, no expert can make these choices for you. Inventories can help you gain self-knowledge, and other people can offer valuable perspectives. However, what you do with the knowledge you gain is entirely up to you. The only expert on your life choices is you.

Invent a major

When choosing a major, you might not need to limit yourself to those listed in your course catalog. Many schools now have flexible programs that allow for independent study. Through such programs you might be able to combine two existing majors or invent an entirely new one of your own.

Choose a complementary minor

You can add flexibility to your academic program through your choice of a minor to complement or contrast with your major. For example, the student who wants to be a minister could opt for a minor in English; all of those courses in composition can help in writing sermons. Or the student with a major in psychology might choose a minor in business administration with the idea of managing a counseling service someday. An effective choice of a minor can expand your skills and career options.

Remember that you can change your mind

Keep your choice of a major in perspective. There is probably no single "correct" choice for you. Rather, your unique collection of skills is likely to give you the basis for several majors.

The odds are that you'll change your major at least once—and that you'll change careers several times during your life. You may even pursue a career that's unrelated to your major.

Students often find that their choice of a major does not bind them to a certain job or career. Many of the majors offered in higher education can help you prepare for several different careers or for further study in graduate school. One benefit of higher education is mobility—gaining transferable skills that can help you move into a new career field at any time.

Viewing a major as a one-time choice that determines your future can raise your stress levels to artificially high levels. Instead, look at choosing a major as the start of a continuing path of discovery, intention, and action. ~