


MAJOR DECISIONS



Illustrations by Gail Armstrong



Tips for choosing a major and navigating the academic journey.

By J. Melody Murdock

“What’s your major?”

If there is a most frequently asked question among college students everywhere, this has to be it. It’s a simple enough inquiry yet can create a lot of angst. Teens today start getting pressure as early as junior high to think about what they want to study in college. Yet data shows that among high school students who note an intended major when they first take the SAT or ACT, more than half change their mind before applying to college. And after they get to campus, the majority of undergraduates change their major more than once.

“Every student’s journey is so different,” says Julia Vincent BS’13 MS’15, academic advisor and director of major exploration at the University of Utah. “Some students come to us very confident in their decision, some agonize over it, and some don’t stress enough.” Then there are those who get derailed trying to please others, realize late in the game that they dislike what they’re studying, or really just have no clue.

Yet the inevitable truth is that students must declare to graduate.

TOP 10

attributes employers are looking for

1. Problem-solving skills
2. Ability to work in a team
3. Written communication skills
4. Leadership
5. Strong work ethic
6. Analytical/quantitative skills
7. Verbal communication skills
8. Initiative
9. Detail-oriented
10. Flexibility/adaptability

Source: *Job Outlook 2018, National Association of Colleges and Employers*

And with 88 majors to choose from at the U, the choice can be daunting. Not to mention, there are a lot of misconceptions out there that only complicate things more. In an effort to make this decision process as successful as possible for everyone involved, this guide dispels common myths and shares experiences, trends, and advice from U academic advisors, career coaches, recruiters, students, and alumni.

Major Myths

I'm already behind schedule.

Stan Inman, director of the U Career and Professional Development Center, likes to nip this one in the bud. "You are where you are," he assures. "You're in a better position than you think to make this decision." He says many students are undecided simply because they haven't purposefully explored their interests and values.

Advisors recommend starting the "discovery" process as early as possible, allowing time later for a "rediscovery," if needed. But when it comes to actually declaring a major, there is no magic deadline. The U requires all students to visit with an academic advisor their freshman year and loosely encourages them to declare a major by the third semester.

"I like to assess timing on an individual basis," says Vincent. "If a student is interested in a shorter major, I don't rush them. If they're interested in a more technical program with a linear four-year schedule, I suggest starting the major sooner." She also recommends mapping out a parallel plan. That way, if students don't get into a competitive major or want to shift gears, they have another path already in the works.

Once I've chosen a major, I have to stick with it.

For a variety of reasons, students often feel like they have to stay loyal to their declared major. They may have concerns about spending more time and money or about other losses such as disappointing others or giving up an identity they've held onto since childhood. ("But I've always wanted to be a teacher and everyone thinks I'd be good at it.")

It's reassuring to note that, according to a data analysis by the Education Advisory Board, students can switch majors any time before their sixth semester without impacting the time it takes to graduate—and they found that up to 85 percent of undergrads do change their major at least once.

Itzel Hernandez BA'16 was only six classes away from graduating when she realized that she didn't like her science major and no longer wanted to become a dentist—a career she had been preparing for since high school. "As a first-generation college student, I selected my first major by seeking a future job title rather than my passions," she explains. "As I neared the end of my third year, I dreaded being in the classroom."

After some self-reflection, Hernandez decided to add a second major that she was more passionate about (political science), even though it meant adding three more semesters. "I didn't want to finish college disliking the main purpose of why I was there," she says. "I wanted to leave the U with career options I would enjoy." Three years later, she now works at a job she loves with the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute in Washington, D.C., and is preparing for law school.

Vincent says she often works with students like Hernandez who realize later in their academic journey that they aren't happy with their major. She helps them take a closer look at alternatives to changing majors, such as shifting gears after graduation or adding skills through a work experience. And if additional time in school is required, Vincent says they have to ask themselves, "Is this extra

WHAT'S
ON THE
HORIZON
FOR CAREERS?

Big data

Machine learning and AI

Social impact/entrepreneurship

START HERE

ACADEMIC PLANNING
advising.utah.edu

EXPLORE OPTIONS
majors.utah.edu

CAREER RESOURCES
careers.utah.edu

SALARY RESEARCH
oneline.org

ALUMNI MENTORS
uofu.alumnifire.com

semester or two worth it if it makes me happier in the long run?"

My major will define the rest of my career.

"There isn't always a direct link between your degree and your career," explains Beth Howard, director of the U's Academic Advising Center. "Many students graduating today will likely end up in jobs that don't even exist yet. The key is to make your education a foundation from which you can continue to grow throughout your career."

U career coach Lindsey Kass-Green agrees. "While a major doesn't necessarily equal a career, exploration for both a major and a career should happen in tandem." She points out that, with the exception of specialized fields, most degrees have more career flexibility than people might think. Take English graduates, for example. "Contrary to stereotypes, they don't all end up as starving authors," she says. "According to our data, a large number of English grads from the U have gone into law, computer science, finance, medicine, and even electronic gaming."

And from a recruiter's perspective, Casey Peay MA'07 agrees that a major doesn't lock you into a career. "You may be a self-taught coder with a degree in psychology and still qualify for a tech job,"

says Peay, a principal director of program management at Microsoft. "Recruiters look for experiences gained in school and the ability to translate those experiences into a future job."

If I major in liberal arts, I won't get a job.

Inman, who's been in the career coaching business for 20-plus years, says that liberal arts majors shouldn't be underestimated. "Successful graduates come from all disciplines," he says. "Over time, our liberal arts, humanities, or social science graduates can sometimes professionally and economically outpace some of our technical majors."

A 2017 study by David Deming, an associate professor of education and economics at Harvard, found that jobs requiring both the so-called soft skills and thinking skills have seen the largest growth in employment and pay in the last three decades. In addition, the National Association of Colleges and Employers identifies the top competencies that recruiters look for above all else in college graduates, such as problem solving, teamwork, communication, leadership, and so on (see sidebar on p. 28).

Vincent reminds us that these are precisely the skills that are honed and developed in liberal arts classes (which include literature, philosophy, arts, language, history, and social sciences). But she also advises students in these majors to supplement with some type of technical skill, which might mean extra classes, a minor, or even grad school. She calls this the "T professional" model. "You have a broad base of skills as the top stroke of the T," she says. "And then go deep in a technical or niche area of expertise for the stem of the T."

Major Do's and Don'ts (for family, mentors, and other influencers)

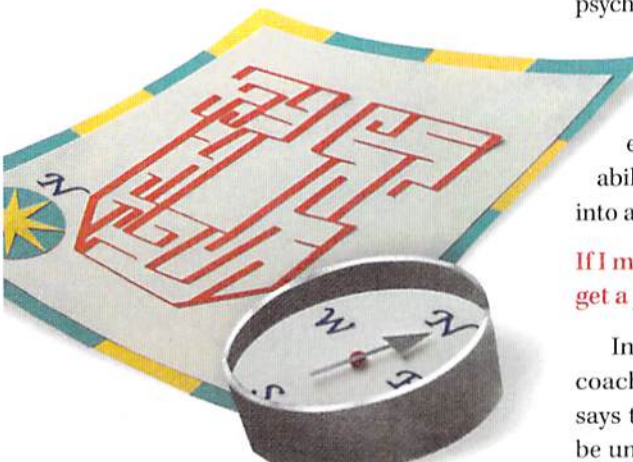
Don't assume college is like it was when you graduated.

Was gaming a major when you graduated? Was blogging a career? "Your college experience was likely vastly different than that of today's students," says Howard. "Applying today's circumstances to a different era isn't always a fair assessment."

For example, fields that used to be higher paying and more secure may now be at higher risk of becoming obsolete. And jobs that didn't exist when you were a student are now driving new majors.

Do your homework, too.

Your job as a parent, spouse, or mentor is to help students "imagine themselves in a spectrum of possibilities,"



says Howard. And to do that, you need to read up as well.

Vincent points out how many misconceptions are out there about salaries, for example. “Careers that you might think make less, might not, and vice versa,” she says. She recommends looking online at the lifetime earnings of careers. “You’d be surprised by what you find. The fields with higher starting salaries often don’t keep up with the more flexible career options that offer bigger pay jumps.”

Encourage students to try new things and have fun.

Howard says the discovery process doesn’t just magically happen; students need to “own it” and start meaningful exploration as early as possible. She highly recommends the UGS/LEAP Major Exploration course, a one-credit class dedicated entirely to examining yourself, majors, and careers.

Vincent adds how important it is to be supportive of all the classes students choose. “Let them try it out and find out if they like it or not,” she says. And this includes fun classes, too, such as ceramics and skiing. “We see students be more successful when they can switch gears and take classes they really enjoy attending.”

Ask helpful questions.

If your grandson tells you he wants to major in, say, modern dance instead of economics and you feel trepidation, what should you say? Vincent says this is when it helps to be prepared with useful questions to better understand the reasons behind choices. So rather than asking, “What are you going to do with that?” you could perhaps ask, “What interests you about that major?”

And even further, she recommends asking students about what they value. “They often know their interests and have a good idea of abilities but haven’t thought about what’s important to them,” she says. Students commonly say they “want to help people” in their profession. She follows that up with, “Who do

you want to help, and how do you want to help them?” She points out that in addition to doctors and nurses, other professionals—financial planners, for example—also help people.

Support internships and work experience.

How does a student stand out when hundreds of others are vying for the same job? “Through experience, academic achievements, and persistence,” says Peay, who in hindsight wishes that he would have pursued more internships in college. “More hands-on experience could have really helped me determine what I liked and wanted to go into after I graduated.”

Kass-Green confirms that work experience is more important than ever, getting more weight with recruiters than the choice of major or GPA. “Early experience is important, even if it’s a campus job,” she says. “As students get farther along, career-related experiences such as internships and capstone projects become invaluable career-building opportunities.”

TRY THIS INSTEAD

Rather than asking a student “What are you going to do with that?”, ask:

- What classes are you enjoying? What do you like about them?
- What’s important to you?
- What kind of lifestyle do you want?
- Why does that (class, career, or major) interest you? Tell me more.

HOW TO STAND OUT

What influences recruiters when deciding between two otherwise equally qualified candidates?

	Rating*
Has completed an internship with their organization	4.6
Has internship experience in their industry	4.4
Major	3.8
Has held a leadership position	3.7
Has general work experience	3.7
Has no work experience	3.4
High GPA (3.0 or above)	3.4
Has been involved in extracurricular activities	3.3
School attended	2.8

*5-point scale where 1=No influence at all; 2=Not much influence; 3=Somewhat of an influence; 4=Very much influence; 5=Extreme influence.
Source: *Job Outlook 2018, National Association of Colleges and Employers*

MAJOR TRENDS

Most popular majors over the past four decades:

1980s

Psychology
Banking and finance
Economics
Political science
English
Accounting
Communication
Sociology
Journalism
Nursing

1990s

Psychology
Sociology
Political science
Accounting
Economics
English
Biology
Finance
Communication
Speech & rhetorical studies

2000s

Psychology
Economics
Finance
Sociology
Communication
Political science
Accounting
Human development & family studies
English
Nursing

2010s

Psychology
Economics
Human development & family studies
Business administration & mgmt
Kinesiology & exercise science
Nursing
Communication
Accounting
Biology
Political science



Major Advice from Alumni

"I think every student should take these four courses: (1) Excel, (2) computer programming, (3) technical writing, and (4) basic finance. You will build upon these subjects in all workplaces regardless of your major."

—Gus Gochnour BA'17

"Go to online job boards and look at the job market, openings, salaries, duties, and skills required. Then pick a major."

—Tram Patterson MS'17 Ph.D'18

"Jobs are not designed to entertain you. That's why they call them jobs. However, getting a good education in a marketable field will give you the most options and benefits, thus allowing you to spend time on what you do love."

—Scott Soward BS'04

"With a strong ability to learn new things, you can always pivot to a new field if you find you don't want to stay where you are. Focus more on that than the exact major (or better yet, choose a major that will help you develop those skills)."

—Joshua Wallace BS'14

"Most of us pick a major/career based on income potential, ability to get a job, perception, etc., and we end up miserable in the process. Figure out the things you refuse to compromise on and tie that into your interests, and you'll find a career that will make you happy."

—Jim Higgins BS'04



Join the discussion at
continuum.utah.edu/major