



HOW TO CHOOSE A MAJOR

Overview

Selecting an academic major is one of the many important decisions students must make in college. While it is a significant decision, it is generally, contrary to public belief, not a defining decision. Then why do some students find it so stressful, while others do not? All students are not the same; some have anxiety over any decision they make, while others get anxious over major decisions for fear they will make a poor choice and thus negatively impact their lives. Some of these concerns may be allayed if we explore some common misconceptions about choosing your major.

Common Misconceptions

- 1. You must choose a major your first semester in college.**
FALSE. Many students remain undecided their first year of college and experiment by enrolling in different courses to see what they find compelling. For many liberal arts majors, you do not have to actually declare your major formally until the beginning of your junior year, so there is time to take a variety of courses. There are some exceptions to this rule (those majors that are mapped out for three years—e.g., education—see Academic Advisement).
- 2. Once you choose a major, you cannot change it.**
FALSE. While many people come in having a tentative major, some studies suggest a figure as high as 80% of entering college students will change their mind at least once in their college career, and college students change their major on average three times during their college career. * (College Parents of America 2015)
- 3. Picking a major and a career is the same thing.**
FALSE. Many students pick a major because they are interested in the subject and may not be interested in going into that career area. For example, there are people who may major in psychology, but do not want to become psychologists. They might find the subject matter interesting and enjoy the courses, but perhaps plan to use some of the transferable skills gained from that major (such as critical thinking, an understanding of human nature, etc.) to enter fields such as human resources, marketing, or law.
- 4. Employers look for graduates with specific majors.**
TRUE AND FALSE. While it is true that for certain careers a specific major is important (such as accounting and computer science), for most careers, this is not the case. Approximately 75% of jobs do **not** require any specific major. Instead, recruiters look for skills that can be acquired through a variety of majors. According to the National Association for Colleges and Employers' *Job Outlook* publication (2015), the top 13 qualities employers look for in a candidate are: leadership, team work, communication skills (written), problem-solving, strong work ethic, analytical, technical, communication (verbal), initiative, computer, flexibility/adaptability, interpersonal skills, and organizational skills. Furthermore, internships and work experience are much more important than a specific major.

5. My major will determine what I do for the rest of my life.

FALSE. Many people end up in careers that are totally unrelated to their college major. What you major in is less important than what you decide to do with your major. Statistics show that the average entering college student will have 12-15 different jobs in his/her lifetime*, many of which maybe totally unrelated to his/her major in college. No one major exists to prepare you for that. (Experience by Symplicity 2015)

Steps in Choosing a Major

Students generally choose a major based on one of two factors. Some students choose a college major based on their interests or skills, and others choose a major based on their career goals. Both are equally valid reasons for choosing a major. Even if you have chosen a career path, there may be many different majors that can help you achieve it. So how does one go about choosing a major?

Identify why you are having difficulty choosing a major.

1. Is it that you lack information about yourself? Do you have difficulty pinpointing your interests, skills, values, or personality and so you do not know what major to pick?
2. Do you know yourself, but have internal or external conflicts such as being interested in too many majors and being unable to decide among them? Or the other extreme: no major interests you at all. Or could it be you are interested in a major, but your parents do not approve of it? Or are you interested in a major, but do not have the skills to do well in it?
3. Is the problem that you lack information about majors and careers? Do you do not know what majors YU offers? Or are you not familiar with the requirements? Or do you not know what you can do with certain majors?
4. Is the issue greater than just choosing a major? Do you have difficulties with decision-making in general? Are you afraid of making the wrong decision?

Strategies to help

1. If you have identified that you lack information about yourself, then ask yourself the following questions: What subjects excite me? What subjects am I good at? How do I like spending my free time? What activities have I enjoyed? What do I value/what issues are important to me? Get feedback from others on how they see you. Get involved in life, activities, volunteerism, or part-time jobs to see what you like and are good at. Make an appointment with the Career Center at YU, who can help guide you on the road to self-discovery.
2. If you have identified that you have some internal conflicts like too many interests, you may want to select a double major or a major and a minor. If nothing excites you academically, your major may be less important than getting involved in practical activities like on-campus leadership positions, volunteer opportunities, or internships/jobs. If external conflicts are at the core, like parental disapproval, share with your parents the research you have done on your choice. Speaking with someone at the Counseling Center or the Career Center at YU also might be helpful.
3. If you have identified that you do not know enough about the majors at YU, then talk to an advisor at the Academic Advisement Center at YU, who can help you gain the information you need about the majors available and their requirements, or just go online to the www.yu.edu and click on Academics. Review the list of majors and identify options that you want to learn more about. You can also log on to the Career Center website (www.yu.edu/career-center) and download fact sheets about majors and career options or sit down with a CDC counselor to discuss careers. Finally, you might want to speak with professors, upperclassmen, or alumni to get their advice and perspective.

4. If decision-making is a problem in general, then you may want to reframe how you look at the decision. Do not see it in terms of absolutes: I am not choosing for a lifetime; I can change my decision; there is no wrong decision. Also, you can schedule a meeting with someone from the Counseling Center at YU, who can help you sift through your thoughts and feelings more clearly and offer you support.

Additional Advice

- 1 Do not panic; instead seek out the resources on campus that can help you with your decision: The Academic Advisement Center, The Counseling Center, The Career Center, faculty, and upperclassmen.
- 2 Choose a major in which you can succeed academically. A strong GPA is important not only for the future when you apply for jobs or graduate schools, but also for the present as it will keep you motivated during college to maintain the momentum needed to study.
- 3 Know you are not alone. While talking with your friends might be helpful, do not gauge yourself according to their barometer. Each person is different and comes to decisions at a different pace.
- 4 Your major does not define you. The skills you develop, the activities in which you become involved, the internships you take on, and the volunteer work you perform will be much more important in the long run.

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Academic Advisement: (appointments can be made on-line as well)

Stern College for Women: 215 Lexington Avenue, 6th floor; 646-592-4170

Sy Syms School of Business (Beren): 215 Lexington Avenue, Room 321, 917-326-4839

Sy Syms School of Business (Wilf): Belfer Hall, Room 412, 212-960-0845

Yeshiva College: Furst Hall, Suite 101, 212-960-5276

Career Center (www.yu.edu/career-center):

Beren Campus: 215 Lexington Avenue, 5th floor; 646-592-4135

Wilf Campus: Furst Hall, Suite 413; 646-592-4090/4293