

Choosing a Major

Choosing a major can be a tough decision. Maybe you are interested in several different fields and can't decide on a direction. Maybe you think you don't have what it takes to succeed in a particular field (even though you probably do.) Maybe you have no idea which major you should choose as you step into college and find hundreds of degree options available to study.

Fear not. Many first-year college students have no idea what they want to do with their lives, much less what they want to major in. In fact, 20 to 50 percent of your fellow freshmen are undecided, and about 75 percent of you will change your major at least once in your college career, according to Liz Freedman (cited below). It's perfectly normal to be undecided.

Read on to find ways to navigate this major decision.

What does “declaring a major” mean, anyway?

A college major is the main course of study for your undergraduate degree. “Declaring a major” means you're officially choosing your major, and you'll do this with the help of your advisor. So let's say you settle on a major in Environmental Studies, with a minor in Geology. Your advisor goes over a list of required courses for a bachelor's in environmental studies: general education requirements, a number of required core classes, and a list of electives to round out the degree. These courses are the basis for the rest of your college career. You'll also choose classes for your minor – that is, the second subject you will study in college, though it is not as intensive as your major (and choosing a minor is optional).

How important is it to choose the right major?

Once you've graduated college with your environmental science degree, you'll (hopefully) get a job in some aspect of environmental science and build your career around that. This means you can spend a big chunk of your life in this field ... so choose your major wisely.

How NOT to choose a major

Some students are pushed by family and peers into a major they're not interested in. Others will look to an authority figure to make this decision for them. Or this decision might go wrong from a lack of information. Some students start a major that sounds interesting, but later discover that

it's much different than they expected. Some choose a major because it offers a potential lucrative salary, and find themselves well-off but miserable every day in their career.

HOW TO CHOOSE A MAJOR

Here are some tips to help you find the answer to the question, "What should I study in college?"

1. Know what you're truly interested in – and what you're good at. Avoid burnout by choosing a major in a subject you truly love. Enjoying your studies goes a long way toward a positive time in college.

2. Talk to your school counselor to learn more about your degree options. Ask for help. Your school counselor has been navigating this world for a long time. They can talk you through available options for your major and let you know what your school can offer.

3. Consider program cost, career possibilities, and salary expectations. College is a significant investment in time and money. So, find out what you can earn in this field, and see if jobs will be available once you leave school.

You absolutely should go chase your dreams – but try to find ways to make those dreams earn a thriving wage.

4. Explore your interests if you're undecided.

- Join student organizations/organizations in the fields you're interested in.
- Take part in summer programs.
- Take career assessments.
- Find somebody who would let you shadow them at their job.
- Volunteer at local nonprofits in your subject of interest.
- Sign up for JCS's Internship Program.

Be sure to keep a list of career-related events, workshops, and volunteering that you've participated in. These look good on your resume – an additional benefit.

5. What have you wanted to do since you were a little kid? Were you talked out of a childhood dream at some point in your life? Were you discouraged from taking subjects you loved as a kid? Change this. Go get that dream back. If it brings you joy again, consider making that your college major.

6. Take general-education requirements first. Gen-eds are meant to make you a more well-rounded person, so you can better understand the world. They also introduce you to fields that you didn't know about before.

Are you enjoying the ecosystem unit in biology? Do you find yourself reading more about the humanistic movement in psychology? Pay attention to what engages you. These breadcrumbs could lead to your major.

7. Assess how strongly you want a specific major. “During my first year of college, I signed up for marching band and wind symphony, took organ and clarinet lessons, and played piano at church. I wanted to major in music performance. But I hated practicing – and practicing is a central tenet of every musician.

Music eventually ended up going by the wayside. I loved it, but not enough to do what was necessary to succeed.” Phyllis A. Whitney said of being a writer, “You must want it enough. Enough to take all the rejections, enough to pay the price of disappointment and discouragement while you are learning.” These words apply to any field you want to go into.

8. Look at job boards to see where your major can take you. Go to a job search board such as LinkedIn or Indeed, click on the Jobs tab, and type your would-be major into the search bar – whether it's writing, entomology, philosophy, or rocket science. Scroll through and browse the jobs that interest you. Copy job titles and descriptions that make you think, “Oh, I want to do this.” See what degree you will need – and investigate them. Try different search terms for your interests, too. Compare what's available locally to what's available nationwide.

This simple exercise might show you job possibilities that you've never heard of. Then, when you declare your major, you'll know what specialized classes you'll need to succeed, and network with people who can help you land your dream jobs.

9. Don't rush the process. You don't have to choose a major right away. During your first year, concentrate on your general education requirements. You can wait until your sophomore year to declare your major if you decide to apply as “Undeclared”. However, be sure to check the acceptance rate at the school you are applying to for students who apply as “undeclared”, because often it can be lower.

10. **Take some time off.** If you're struggling with the decision, take a semester or two off. You don't have to finish your degree in four years. Find a full-time job, or go traveling if you can afford it. Find out a little more about the world and what it can offer you – and what you can offer it. Then go back to college once you've settled on what you want to do there.

In the meanwhile, if somebody asks you what your major is, don't say you're "undecided." Say you're "exploring your options."