

Choosing a Major or Minor

One of the biggest decisions you may have to make as a college student is what to choose as a major. Whether you are initially choosing a major, considering adding an additional major or minor, or having second thoughts about your current choice, the following ideas can help you with your decision. The Career and Professional Development Center offers a variety of resources to assist you in thinking through and making informed choices rather than simply falling into some program. Remember, it is your decision and your future. When you begin evaluating, try not to allow society or university expectations, your friends' influence, or your parents' pressure (even though they may be footing most bills!) gets in the way. In the end, you are the one who will have to live with your choices. The choosing, changing, or adding a major is a process begins by considering the following:

1. *Assess or review your interests, aptitudes, values, and personality*
 - Begin formulating answers to the questions in the "Introspection" section of this Success Guide.
 - Schedule a career counseling appointment with your Consultant that may include one or more structured career assessments to relate your characteristics to majors, minors and careers.
2. *Learn about majors, minors and careers*
 - Review the content of majors, minors and academic options by browsing the Undergraduate Catalog and department web pages, and by meeting with faculty advisors.
 - Examine the "Expand Your Horizons" section of this Success Guide.
 - Meet with an academic advisor to explore double majors, minors, options and electives. Use the Career Library to explore the relationship between majors and careers.
 - Utilize CareerSearch of the Vault Guides.
3. *Plan experiences to increase your awareness and marketability*
 - Consider how you can gain experience with your fields of interest. Review some of the options listed in the latter part of the "Expand Your Horizons" section.
 - Take advantage of the University resources listed in the "Explore the Possibilities" section of this Success Guide.
4. *Review information and make tentative decisions*
 - Periodically reevaluate your interests, values and skills in terms of your academic and career choices.
 - Meet with your Career Consultant as a neutral place to view how your characteristics relate to the academic and career information that you've researched.
 - Meet with advisors and faculty for their assessment of your potential for success based on your aptitudes and motivation.

Introspection

There are no easy, overnight answers in the major decision or career planning process, but asking the following questions will get you started on the path of making a sound, educated choice.

Interests - What gives you energy? What do you avoid? What reading or activities are you attracted to when there are no requirements? What books do you fall asleep over?

Abilities - What comes naturally to you? What talents have you not had enough opportunity to test or develop? What do you excel in?

Values and Environment - What is most important to you in an academic environment: support, competitive challenges, reputation, flexibility, etc.? What is most important to you in a work environment: creativity, security, independence, helping others, outlook, etc.? What role do you want work to play in your life?

Academic Information - Do you know the complete range of majors, minors and concentrations available to you including relevant ones in other academic colleges? Are there particular courses or experiences that would be most useful in testing your skills and interests? Have you discussed your interests and options with an academic advisor? Have you sought information from a variety of upper-class students? What are the ranges of career options that are open to a particular academic path?

Career Information - Have you explored a wide range of career options that match your interests, abilities and values? Have you investigated different academic paths to meet a particular career goal? Do you know the actual day-to-day activities of an occupation that you are considering? Have you spoken with anyone actually working in that role?

Your Motivations - Here are some not-so-good sole reasons for choosing a major or minor:

- *"It seems like a 'safe' choice to increase my marketability."* - While getting a job or getting into graduate school is probably your eventual goal, looking only at outlook and marketability is not necessarily the best means to this end. If you choose a major or minor that's considered "hot" or "safe" but don't do well in it, you may find that employers or graduate admissions departments won't be too excited about your candidacy. If you don't really like and enjoy your academic path, then you will have difficulty communicating genuine enthusiasm in an interview or on an application.
- *"It's what I can make the most money in."* - Similar to outlook, this may be one aspect that could serve as a criterion in making a decision, but it shouldn't be the primary one. Again if you don't like or do well at your chosen area, you probably won't get that high paying job. Plus you need to ask yourself how you would feel about waking up each morning to face a major or job that is unpleasant or a real struggle to do. Living for the weekends or hoping to save money for an "early retirement" probably will not compensate over the long haul for a miserable 40+ hours that you may put in weekly.
- *"It's what I've always wanted to do."* - But do you really know what the major entails or what the career in the "real world" means? Double check your past intuitive choices with substantive information. Examine whether you are the same person as that junior high student who voiced an early preference. Determine whether or not your early choice took you on such a narrow path that you left behind very significant interests or perhaps you've never had much opportunity to explore the wide range of career options available to you.
- *"Everyone says I'd be good at this."* - What do you think? Are people overlooking some of your other talents because they are not as marketable or don't easily connect to a specific major (i.e., public speaking skills)? Also double check whether you enjoy something in addition to having talent for it.
- *"I enrolled with this preference as a freshman and now it's too late to change."* - It may be inconvenient or possibly expensive to change, but it's never too late to make a better choice. The Career and Professional Development Center often counsels very unhappy alumni who decide it's time to deal with their earlier misdirected choices. Rather than sweeping things under the carpet, examine your choices and options. You may be pleasantly surprised to see that your curriculum is flexible enough that you do not need a fifth year, or you may find that attending graduate school for an entirely different program is a good option for redirection.

- *"I want to choose something that is especially challenging."* - Although this may be a value you want in your job, be careful not to set yourself up for failure. Carnegie Mellon students are bright and can pursue most any option, so why not be sure you also like what you're doing? Notice whether you like the process of studying or doing something, and not that you only have a positive feeling from overcoming the insurmountable. Notice where your natural talents lie and what things come more easily to you than others. Choosing something that is a natural skill is not a cop-out. As a matter of fact, you'll probably get so good at it that you will be challenged at the highest levels within your field instead of simply struggling to keep up with the basics of another field.
- *"It's what Carnegie Mellon is known for."* - Reputation may be one good reason to choose a major within a university, but be wary of allowing it to make you feel stuck in something that you don't like or do well in. Some departments that aren't as well known nationally may turn out as better options because of the added personal attention. Also, there are many ways to increase your marketability besides depending on the reputation of a department. Leaving a particular major is not "giving up" if you're choosing something that is better suited to your personal interests, skills and values.
- *"I really liked the style and enthusiasm of my teacher."* - That person provided you with wonderful initial exposure, but double check to see whether it lasts through other teachers and a deeper presentation of the subject.
- *"A double major or minor will look good on my resume."* or *"It's an easy double major/minor to fit in."* - Although marketability may be a concern, realize there are many creative ways to format your resume, and the "label" may not be that essential. There are also other ways to increase your marketability. As a matter of fact, you may find careful selection of electives more useful than striving to squeeze in an existing academic option.

Expand Your Horizons

Labels Can Be Limiting

Sometimes a particular major is chosen because it seems like the only academic path leading to a certain career. Sometimes a major is avoided because it doesn't sound marketable or it isn't readily apparent what the career options are. After all, don't most History majors become lawyers? Doesn't a person need to be a Business Administration major to succeed in business? Wouldn't an Art major label one permanently as an artist? And what could a pure Math major who is not on an "applied track" possibly do except teach?

These questions reflect typical constraining views of how majors may be linked to careers. The reality is that there are many career options that one can successfully pursue with any given major. To demonstrate how diverse one's options might be, here are a few alumni whose interesting post graduate plans do not seem very connected to their early academic training:

- *Business Administration, B.S. '07*
Music Management Associate
Sony

- *Computer Science, B.S. '07*
Psychology Research Associate
Carnegie Mellon University

- *Biological Sciences, B.S. '07*
Business Analyst
Deloitte Consulting

- *Art, B.F.A. '07*
Law School
University of Pittsburgh

- *Economics and Psychology, B.A. '07*
Market Research Assistant
Heinz, USA

- *Chemical Engineering, B.S. '07*
Investment Associate
Putnam Investments

You can gain insight into your field of interest by using the Career and Professional Development Center's *Post Graduate Survey Results*

http://www.studentaffairs.cmu.edu/career/students_alumni/post-grad-survey/index.html to explore what past graduates have done with their majors. You may also wish to talk with faculty for more information.

More on Marketability - As stated earlier, outlook and feasibility are often considerations when choosing majors and careers. Not everyone feels that a bright outlook is essential and many accept that their chosen field may be quite competitive. It is good to at least make that decision knowing future obstacles and possibly thinking of back up choices which can help pay rent if necessary.

It is more frequent, however, at Carnegie Mellon to be very concerned about whether one's major is marketable. Recognize that there are many ways to increase marketability that may distinguish you even more so than your choice of major. You can demonstrate to potential employers your initiative and propensity towards your field with:

- *Relevant work experience*
- *Related internship experience for academic credit*
- *Volunteering in a career-related capacity*
- *Relevant extracurricular activities*
- *Independent study experiences geared toward your major field of interest*
- *Targeting papers or projects to your special interest*
- *Participation in some of the programs of the Undergraduate Research Office, Check the web site for updated opportunities.*
- *Study abroad experiences*
- *Deliberate selection of electives*
- *Career goal clarity*
- *Student membership in a professional association*
- *Nurturing relationships with potential references*
- *Networking contacts with professionals*

Explore the Possibilities

Career Counseling Services

Whether you are making your initial major choice, confirming a decision, or having second thoughts about an existing decision, your Career Consultant can be a valuable resource to explore the wide range of career options for a particular major as well as help you understand how your interests, abilities and values may relate to majors and minors. Sometimes merely being directed to career information is sufficient. Many students, however, prefer structured meetings which involve direct experiences designed to facilitate the planning process, such as doing an interest inventory to more directly connect information about themselves to majors, minors and careers. The following are some of the resources available through your Career Consultant:

- *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)* is a computer based assessment that helps you identify your unique preferences for interacting with the environment and is reported as one of sixteen types. Your particular type is a useful way to understand your needs and comfort zone in your work environment.
- *The Strong Interest Inventory* is a computer-based assessment in which you answer whether you like, dislike or feel indifferent about a number of courses, occupations and hobbies. The results give feedback about your interest areas and how they relate to each other as well as how your scores correlate with satisfied individuals in a variety of occupations. Discussion about how your interests relate to majors and minors can also be included.

- *Skill and Values Informal Self Assessments* can help you identify primary skills you've already been using and to consciously decide what's really important to you in work and life (i.e., creativity, economic security, decision making roles, etc.)

The Gloria Geib Memorial Career Library

The Career Library offers many books which describe career fields as well as outlook, training and salary information. You can find shelves of books focusing on the arts, sciences, business, and humanities.

Student Employment Programs

Gaining relevant work experience is another avenue for making or confirming academic decisions. Check out TartanTRAK for part-time, summer, and campus jobs.

Other University Resources and Options

- Academic Advisors - If you haven't recently met with yours, this would be a good place to begin discussing academic plans. If your plans involve changing majors or academic colleges, you may find that an associate dean is a relevant resource.
- Departmental Advisors - If you would like more specific information about a particular department or program, see the appendix for a list of contact persons for various majors and minors.
- An Exploring Semester - All academic colleges have a means to facilitate your exploration between colleges. You may officially be called a Dean's Student, Transitional Student or Non-Departmental Student. This allows you to retain your current academic status and explore options for one semester through course work. Associate deans typically serve as advisors for this.
- The Student Defined Major Program - This option is for College of Humanities and Social Sciences students whose educational goals cannot be adequately served by the curricula of existing majors. Guidelines on writing a proposal are available. (Academic Advising Center, BH A57, x8-2924)
- Counseling and Psychological Services - This resource may be especially relevant for further self awareness and to address academic and career stresses from peer pressure, parental influence or academic difficulty. (Morewood Gardens E103, x8-2922)
- Academic Development – The Learning Zone provides skills programs on topics such as note taking and anxiety. (Cyert Hall, Suite B5, x8-6878)
- Community Service - This program is handled by the Office of Student Life. Current opportunities are posted in a monthly bulletin. (Morewood Gardens, 1060 Morewood Ave., x8-2142)
- Office of International Education - This resource provides students with many opportunities to study abroad and gain experience with the world on an international scale. (Warner Hall 301, x8-5231)
- Alumni Relations - Alumni Relations can provide Clan Leader contacts for a variety of cities that may facilitate connections with "real world" contacts and career information:
<http://alumni.cmu.edu/>

Appendix

Whom Can I Talk To About Specific Programs?

If you find that you are interested in a particular field of study or would like more information about a major or minor before making a decision, please consult the webpage for the college that interests you at: <http://www.cmu.edu/home/index/departments.html>