

Quintessential Careers: Choosing a College Major: How to Chart Your Ideal Path

by Randall S. Hansen, Ph.D.

The most important piece of advice in this article follows this sentence, so please make note of it and repeat it to yourself as often as you need as you read this article and make decisions regarding choosing a major in college. Are you ready for it? The advice: **Don't panic.**

I know it's easier said than done, but I can't tell you how many students I have advised since the time that I have been a professor that seem in a state of panic if they are uncertain of their major, let alone a career. Choosing a major, thinking about a career, getting an education -- these are the things college is all about. Yes, there are some students who arrive on campus and know exactly their major and career ambitions, but the majority of students do not, thus there is no need to rush into a decision about your major as soon as you step on campus.

And guess what? A majority of students in all colleges and universities change their major at least once in their college careers; and many change their major several times over the course of their college career.

This article is all about giving you some pointers and direction -- some steps for you to take -- in your journey toward discovering that ideal career path for you. But it is a journey, so make sure you spend some time thinking about it before making a decision. And don't be discouraged if you still don't have a major the first time you take this journey...your goal should be narrowing your focus from all possible majors to a few areas that you can then explore in greater depth.

Please also keep in mind that many schools have double majors, some triple majors, and most minors as well as majors. Way back when I was an undergraduate at Syracuse University, I was a dual major in marketing and magazine journalism. Today I am a college professor and Webmaster of a top career resources Website...which brings me to the last piece of general advice before you begin your journey: your major in college is important for your first job after graduation, but studies show that most people will change careers -- yes, careers -- about four or five times over the course of their lives -- and no major exists that can prepare you for that!

The **first** stop on your journey should be an examination or self-assessment of your interests. What types of things excite you? What types of jobs or careers appeal to you? If you are not sure, start the process at [Quintessential Careers: Career Assessment](#). Also, many, if not all, college career centers have a variety of self-tests you can take to help you answer some of these questions.

The **second** stop on your journey is an examination of your abilities. What are your strengths? What are your weaknesses? What kind of skills do you have? You can begin this self-examination by looking at the courses you took in high school. What were your best subjects? Is there a pattern there? What kinds of extracurricular activities did you participate in while in high school? What kinds of things did you learn from part-time or summer jobs? While you can only do part of it now, you may want to skim through our article, [Using a SWOT Analysis in Your Career Planning](#).

The **third** stop on your journey involves examining what you value in work. Examples of values include: helping society, working under pressure, group affiliation, stability, security, status, pacing, working alone or with groups, having a positive impact on others, and many others. Again, a visit to your college's career center should help. You can also check out our [Workplace Values Assessment for Job-Seekers](#), which examines what you value in your job, your career, and your work.

The **fourth** stop on your journey is career exploration. The University of California at Berkeley offers [Career Exploration Links – Occupations](#), which allows you to explore a general list of occupations or search for a specific occupation and provides links to resources that give you lots of information about the occupation(s) you choose. There are many schools that offer similar "what can I do with a major in..." fact sheets or Websites, but one of my favorites is at [Ashland University](#). You can also learn more about various occupations, including future trends, by searching the [Bureau of Labor Statistics' Occupational Outlook Handbook](#). You can find all these resources -- and more -- at [Quintessential Careers: Career Exploration Tools](#).

The **fifth** stop on your journey is the reality check. You need to honestly evaluate your options. Do you really value physicians and have an interest in being a doctor, but have little skills in science? Does your occupation require an advanced degree, but your future commitments preclude graduate study? Do you have a strong interest in the arts, but your family is convinced you will become a CPA like your father? There are often ways to get around some of the obstacles during the reality check, but it is still important to face these obstacles and be realistic about whether you can get around them.

The **sixth** and final stop on your journey is the task of narrowing your choices and focusing on choosing a major. Based on all your research and self-assessment of the first five stops on your journey, you should now have a better idea of the careers/majors you are not interested in pursuing as well as a handful of potential careers/majors that do interest you. What are the typical majors found at a comprehensive university? Visit [Quintessential Careers: College Majors](#) for a listing of the typical college majors.

What are some other resources for helping you get more information about a major and/or a career?

Take advantage of:

- Your **college's course catalog** — you'll be amazed at the wealth of information you can find here...from required courses to specialized majors and tracks.
- Your **professors**, including your academic adviser — talk with your professors, whether you have taken a class with them or not...many of them have worked in the field in which they teach and all are experts about careers and career opportunities.
- Your **classmates**, especially upperclassmen — these are the folk who are deep into their major, perhaps already having had an internship or gone through job interviews...use them as a resource to gather more information.
- Your **college's alumni** — unless your college was just founded, your school probably has a deep and varied group of alums, many of whom like to talk with current students...so use them as a resource to gather more information about careers.
- Your **family and friends** — there's a wealth of information right at your fingertips. Next time you go home or call home, ask your family about majors and careers.
- Your **college's career center** — almost always under-appreciated, these folk have such a wealth of information at their fingertips that it is a shame more students don't take advantage of them...and not just in your senior year — start visiting in your first year because most have resources for choosing a major and a career, as well as internship and job placement information. Read more about this option by reading our article, [It's Never Too Early -- or Too Late -- to Visit Your College Career Office](#).

There are also a number of books that you may find useful, including:

- [How to Choose a College Major](#), by Linda Landis Andrews (VGM Career Horizons).
- [The College Board Guide to 150 Popular College Majors](#), by Renee Gernand (College Entrance Examination Board).
- [The College Majors Handbook: The Actual Jobs, Earnings, and Trends for Graduates of 60 College Majors](#), by Paul E. Harrington and Thomas F. Harrington (Jist Works).
- [Major Decisions: A Guide to College Majors](#), Richard A. Blumenthal and Joseph A. Despres (Wintergreen/Orchard House).
- [Major in Success: Make College Easier, Beat the System, and Get a Very Cool Job](#), Patrick Combs (Ten Speed Press).

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