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Discovering a Major that's Compatible with Your Personal Interests and Talents

In addition to knowing your intellectual strengths and learning styles, another key factor to factor into your decisions about a college major are your *interests*. Here are some specific strategies for exploring and confirming whether a major is compatible with your educational interests.

Reflect on past learning experiences that you found stimulating and were productive. Think about previous classes that piqued your curiosity and in which you produced your best work. The subjects of these courses may be major fields of study that match up well with your interests, talents, and learning style.

At the website: www.mymajors.com, you can enter information about your academic performance in high school courses. Your inputted information will be analyzed and you'll receive a report on what college majors appear to be a good match for you. You can do the same for the first courses you complete in college.

Take a look at introductory textbooks in the field you're considering as a major. Review the table of contents and read a few pages of the text to get some sense of the writing style used in the field and whether the topics are compatible with your educational interests. You should be able to conveniently find introductory textbooks for different fields of study in your college bookstore.

Seek out students majoring in the subject you're considering and ask them about their experiences. Talk to several students in the field you're considering to get a different and balanced perspective on what it's like. You can find these students by visiting student clubs on campus related to the major (e.g., psychology club or history club). You could also check the class schedule to see when and where classes in that major are meeting. Go there and speak with students about the major, either before or after class. The following questions may be good ones to ask students in a major you're considering:

- What attracted you to this major?
- What would you say are the advantages and disadvantages of majoring in this field?
- Knowing what you know now, would you choose the same major again?

Also, ask students about the quality of teaching and advising in the department. Studies show that different departments within the same college or university can vary greatly in terms of the quality of teaching as well as their educational philosophy and attitude toward students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; 2005).

Sit in on some classes in the field you're considering as a major. If the class you'd like to visit is large, you may be able to just slip into the back row and listen. If the class is small, ask the instructor for permission. When visiting a class, focus on the content or ideas being covered rather than the instructor's personality or teaching style. Remember: you're trying to decide

whether to major in the subject, not the teacher.

Discuss the major you're considering with an academic advisor. To get unbiased feedback about the pros and cons of majoring in that field, it's probably best to speak with an academic advisor who works with students from a variety of majors. If you're still interested, you can follow up by getting more detailed information by consulting with an advisor who works primarily with students in that particular major.

Speak with faculty members in the department. Consider asking them the following questions:

- What academic skills or qualities are needed for a student to be successful in your field?
- What are the greatest challenges faced by students majoring in your field?
- What do students seem to like most and least about majoring in your field?
- What can students do with a major in your field after graduation?
- What types of graduate programs or professional schools would a student in your major be well prepared to enter?

(For a more extensive list of faculty-interview questions, see the Appendix on p. 6)

Surf the website of the professional organization associated with the field you're considering as a major. These websites often contain useful information for students interested in pursuing a major in the field. To locate the professional website for a field you would like to explore as a major, ask a faculty member in that field or complete a search on the web by simply entering the name of the field followed by the word "association." For example, if you're thinking about becoming an anthropology major, check out the website of the American Anthropological Association. If you're considering history as a major, take a look at the website of the American Historical Association. The website of the American Philosophical Association contains information about nonacademic careers for philosophy majors, and the American Sociological Association's website identifies various careers that sociology majors are qualified to pursue.

Visit your Career Development Center to inquire about what college graduates have gone on to do with the major you're considering. Ask if the Center has information about the type of careers the major can lead to and what graduate or professional school programs students often enter after completing the major.

Be sure you're aware of all courses required for the major you've chosen or are considering. You can find this information in your college catalog, university bulletin, or campus website. If you're in doubt, seek assistance from an academic advisor.

Sometimes college majors require courses you would never expect to be required. Students interested in majoring in the field of forensics are often surprised by the number of science courses for this major. Keep in mind that college majors often require courses in fields outside of the major that are designed to support the major. For instance, psychology majors are often required to take at least one course in biology, and business majors are often required to take calculus.

If you're interested in majoring in a particular field, be sure you are fully aware of such

outside requirements and are comfortable with them. Once you've accurately identified all courses required for the major you're considering, ask yourself the following two questions:

1. Do the course titles and descriptions appeal to my interests and values?
2. Do I have the abilities or skills needed to do well in these courses?

Be sure you know if certain academic standards must be met to be admitted to the major. Some college majors may be “impacted” or “oversubscribed,” meaning that more students are interested in majoring in these fields than there are openings for students to major in them. Majors that are often most likely to be oversubscribed are pre-professional fields which lead directly to a particular career (e.g., engineering, premed, nursing, or physical therapy). On some campuses, these majors are called “restricted” majors, meaning that departments control their enrollment by restricting the number of students admitted to the major. Departments may limit admission to students who earn a GPA of 3.0 or higher in certain introductory courses required by the major, or they may rank students who apply for the major according to their overall GPA and go down the list until the maximum number of openings has been filled.

If you intend to major in a restricted field of study, be sure to keep track of whether you're meeting the acceptance standards of the major as you continue to complete courses and earn grades. If you're falling short of the academic standards of the major you hope to enter despite working at your maximum level of effort and regularly using the learning assistance services available on campus, consult with an academic advisor about the possibility of finding an alternative field of study that may be closely related to the restricted major you were hoping to enter.

Use your elective courses to test your interest in subjects that you might major in. As its name implies, “elective” courses are those you elect or choose to take. They come in two forms: free electives and restricted electives. *Free electives* are any courses you take that count toward your college degree but aren't required for general education or a major. *Restricted electives* are courses you must take, but you get to choose them from a restricted list (menu) of possible courses that have been specified by your college that fulfill a requirement in general education or a major. For example, your campus may have a general education requirement in the social or behavioral sciences that stipulates you must take two courses in this field, but you choose what those two courses are from a list of options (e.g., anthropology, economics, political science, psychology, or sociology). If you're considering one of these fields as a possible major, you can take an introductory course in that subject to test your interest in the subject while simultaneously fulfilling a general-education requirement needed for graduation. This strategy allows you to use general education as the main highway for travel toward your final destination (a college degree) while using your restricted electives to explore side roads (potential majors) along the way. You can use the same strategy with your free electives.

“I took it (Biology) to satisfy the distribution requirement and I ended up majoring in it.”
— Pediatrician (quoted in Brooks, 2009)

Naturally, you don't have to use all your electives to explore majors. Up to one-third your courses in college may be electives. This leaves you with a significant amount of freedom to shape your college experience in a way that best meets your educational and personal goals. Listed below are ten suggestions for making the best use of your free electives.

Top-Ten Suggestions for Making the Most of Your College Electives

Elective courses give you the academic freedom to take personal control over your coursework. Exercise this freedom responsibly by making strategic selection of electives that allow you to make the most of your college experience and college degree.

Listed below are 10 recommendations for making effective use of your college electives. As you read them, note three strategies that appeal most to you and that you're most likely to put into practice.

You can make strategic use of your elective to:

1. **Complete a minor or build an area of concentration.** Electives can be used to pursue a field of personal interest that complements and strengthens your major. (See p ___ for further details.)
2. **Help you choose a career path.** Just as you can use electives to test your interest in a college major, you can use them to test your interest in a career. For instance, you could enroll in:
 - career planning or career development courses; and
 - courses that include internships or service learning experiences in a field you're considering as a possible career (e.g., health, education, or business).
3. **Strengthen your skills in areas that may appeal to future employers.** For instance, courses in foreign language, leadership development, and persuasive communication can develop skills attractive to current employers. (See chapter 2 for skills sought by today's employers.)
4. **Develop practical life skills.** Courses in managing personal finances, marriage and family, or child development can help you manage your money and your family relationships.
5. **Seek balance in your life and develop yourself as a whole person.** You can use your electives intentionally to cover all key dimensions of self-development. Electives may be used to promote your emotional development (e.g., stress management), social development (e.g., social psychology), intellectual development (e.g., critical thinking), physical development (e.g., nutrition or self-defense), and spiritual development (e.g., world religions or death and dying).

"I discovered an unknown talent and lifelong stress-reducing hobby."

—An attorney talking about an elective ceramics course taken in college (quoted in Brooks, 2009)

6. **Make connections between different academic disciplines (subject areas).** *Interdisciplinary* courses are courses designed specifically to integrate two or more academic disciplines. For instance, psychobiology is an interdisciplinary course that integrates the fields of psychology (focusing on the mind) and biology (focusing on the body), enabling you to see how the mind influences the body and vice versa.

Making connections across subjects and seeing how they can be combined to create a more complete understanding of personal or societal issues can be a stimulating mental

experience. Furthermore, the presence of interdisciplinary courses on your college transcript may be attractive to future employers because “real world” work responsibilities and challenges cannot be handled through the lens of a single major; they require the ability to integrate skills acquired from different fields of study (Colby et al., 2011)..

7. **Help you develop broader perspectives on the human condition and the surrounding world.** You can intentionally take electives that progressively widen your world perspectives, such courses that take a societal perspective (sociology), a national perspective (political science), an international perspective (world geography), a global perspective (ecology), and a cosmological perspective (astronomy).
8. **Appreciate different cultural viewpoints and enhance your ability to communicate with people from diverse cultural backgrounds.** You could take electives that focus on cultural differences across nations (e.g., international relations) or courses related to cultural differences within America (e.g., race and ethnicity).
9. **Stretch yourself beyond your customary learning style to experience different ways of learning and acquire new skills.** You’ll find courses in the college curriculum you’ve never taken before (or even knew existed) that supply you with knowledge and skills you’ve never had a previous opportunity to acquire or develop. These courses will stretch your mind, allow you to explore new ideas and expand your skill set in a way that’s consistent with a key characteristic of successful people—a “growth mindset.
10. **Learn something you were always curious about.** If you’ve always wondered how members of the other sex think and feel, you could take a course on the psychology of men and women. Or, if you’ve heard about a particular professor who teaches a course that students find especially interesting, take that course and find out why it’s so interesting.

Your college catalog (bulletin) contains descriptions of all courses offered on your campus. Take time to review these course descriptions carefully and explore all the elective options available to you.

Your elective courses give you the opportunity to shape and create an academic experience that’s uniquely your own. Seize this opportunity to exercise your academic freedom responsibly. Don’t make elective choices randomly or merely on the basis of scheduling convenience (e.g., choosing electives to create a schedule with no early morning or late afternoon classes). Instead, make course selections strategically so that they contribute most to your educational, personal, and professional development.

“Try not to take classes because they fit neatly into your schedule. Start by identifying classes that are most important to you and fit your schedule to accommodate them.”
—Katharine Brooks, *You Majored in What?*

Appendix

FACULTY INTERVIEW Questions

Identify a faculty member on campus in a field you've chosen or are considering as a college major. Make an appointment to speak with that faculty member during office hours to learn about that field of study. Let the faculty member know the purpose of your visit. Use the following interview questions, or any other questions you think would help you get to know the faculty member and give you a better understanding of the field.

1. What initially *attracted* you to your academic field?
2. *When* did you decide to pursue a career in your academic field? Was it your *first* choice, or did you *change* to it from another academic area? (If you changed your original major, *why* did you change?)
3. What would you say is the most *enjoyable, exciting, or stimulating* aspect of your field of study?
4. Are there any *unexpected* requirements in your academic field that proved to be particularly *challenging* for students?
5. What *careers* are related to your academic field? (Or, what types of careers does a major in your field prepare its students to pursue?)
6. What particular *skills, abilities, or talents* do you think are needed for *success* in your field of study?
7. What personality *traits* or personal *interests* do you think would “*match up*” well with the type of work required in your academic field?
8. What particular *courses* or *out-of-class experiences* would you recommend to help students decide if your field is a good fit for them?