* Discovering *yourself* and knowing *your options* should take place *before* declaring your major and choosing your career.

One of the primary advantages of taking the wide range of courses that make up the liberal arts curriculum is that they enable you to become more aware of different aspects of yourself, while at the same time, you become more aware of the variety of academic disciplines and subject areas that are available to you as possible majors. Your trip through the liberal arts curriculum will likely result in your discovery of new personal interests and new choices for majors, some of which may be in fields that you didn’t even know existed.

Also, your exposure to a wide range of subjects provides you with the general context (the “whole”) that is needed to make an intelligent selection of your specific major (one “part” of the whole), and to understand how your particular major connects with or “fits into” the bigger picture. In other words, you need to take a trip through the forest before you can select the right tree. So, look at your trip through the liberal arts curriculum as an exploratory journey in which you are searching to make three key discoveries:

(a) discovering the full range of choices for majors that are available to you,
(b) discovering where your special interests, values, talents, and abilities lie, and
(c) discovering what specialized major best “matches” your special interests, values, talents, and abilities.

Remember that finding *yourself* and your *options* should take place *before* you find a major and future career. You don’t build your life around a major and a career; you build a major and career around your life. Even if you have already decided on a major, you will still need to explore specialized fields within your major to find one that is most compatible with your personal interests, abilities, and values. For instance, if you have decided to major in communications, you will still need to select what particular field or communication media to specialize in, such as visual media (e.g., film or television), print media (e.g., journalism), or sound media (e.g., radio). Similarly, if you are interested in pursuing a career in law, you will eventually need to decide what branch of law you wish to practice (for example, criminal law, corporate law, or family law).

So, if you have decided on a major field of study, the liberal arts component of your college experience will help you explore specializations within that field by exposing you to a wide variety of subject areas and testing your skills and interests in these areas. Furthermore, your exposure to different fields of study in the liberal arts curriculum may result in your discovery of a second field that interests you, which you may decide to pursue as a *minor* to go along with your major.

As a beginning college student, it is only natural to feel at least somewhat uncertain about your intended major because you have not yet experienced the variety of subjects or fields of study that make up the college curriculum. So, if you are currently uncertain about a major, this is nothing to be embarrassed about. The term “undecided” or
“undeclared” doesn’t mean that you have somehow failed or are lost, while everybody else has it all figured out. (In fact, the term “undeclared” has acquired such a negative connotation that a TV sitcom about college students was created with that very name. As you may already know or have guessed, this show’s episodes focused frequently on first-year college students who were academically clueless, unmotivated, “party animals.”)

As a new student, you may be undecided or undeclared for a variety of good reasons that have nothing to do with lack of self-motivation or personal direction and nothing to do with procrastination or indecisiveness. For instance, you may be undecided simply because you have interests in a variety of subjects. This is actually a health form of indecision because it shows that you have a broad range of interests and a high level of motivation to learn about different subjects. You may also be undecided simply because you are a careful, reflective thinker whose decision-making style is to gather more information (e.g., by gaining first-hand experience with different subjects) before making any long-term commitments. In one study of students who were undecided about a major when they started college, 43% had several ideas in mind but were not yet ready to commit to one of them (Gordon & Steele, 2003). These students were not “totally clueless;” instead, they had some ideas but still wanted to explore them and keep their options open, which is a very effective way to go about making decisions.

Classic Quote

“All who wander are not lost.”
—J. R. R. Tolkien, Lord of the Rings

While it is true that decisions sometimes can be put off too long, resulting in procrastination, it is also true that they can be made too quickly, resulting in premature decisions reached without the decision maker taking enough time to carefully think through all options. Judging from the large number of students who end-up changing their minds about a college major, it is probably safe to say that more students make the mistake of reaching a decision about a major too quickly, rather than procrastinating about it indefinitely. This may be due to the fact that students hear this question over and over again, even before they step foot on a college campus: “What are you going to major in when you go to college?” You probably also saw this question on your college applications, and you are likely to hear it again during your first term in college. This is a prime time in your college experience for meeting new people, and when you meet them, almost immediately after they ask the typical opening question (“What’s your name?”), get ready for the typical follow-up question (you guessed it): “What’s your major?” Also, if members of your family are helping you pay for the rising cost of a college education, they may frequently ask this question—hoping you will have a definite answer to it—because paying for college becomes a little easier for them if they know you have a definite idea about what you’re going to while you’re there (your major) and what you’ll do with it after you leave there (your career).

Despite any pressure you may be receiving from others to make an early decision, we encourage you not to officially commit to a particular major until you gain more self-knowledge and more knowledge about your options. Even if you think you’re sure about your choice of major, before you make a commitment to “enlist and sign-up” for it, take a course or two in the major to “test it out”. Make sure that your first choice is your best choice—the one that is most compatible or consistent with your personal abilities
and interests. Studies show that students learn more when the material covered in their courses tends to “match” or “fit” their personal interests and abilities (Curricular Research Program, 1995). Furthermore, studies show that students are more likely to continue in college and graduate when they choose majors that are “in line” with their personal interests (Leuwerke, et al., 2004).

In fact, it may be unrealistic for you, a first-term student, to make a final decision about a college major before you’ve had at least some experience with the courses that comprise the liberal arts curriculum. One key purpose of a liberal arts education is to help new students develop the critical thinking skills needed to make wise choices and well-informed decisions, such as choice of your college major. The liberal arts curriculum is also designed to introduce you to a variety of academic subjects, and as you progress through this curriculum, you may discover subjects that really captivate you and capture your interest. Some of these subjects may represent fields of study that you never experienced before (e.g., philosophy, anthropology, zoology, and art history), and all of them represent possible choices for a college major. In addition to finding new fields of possible interest, as you gain experience with the college curriculum, you are likely to gain more self-knowledge your academic strengths and weaknesses. This is important knowledge to have and to take into consideration when choosing a major, because you want to select a field that builds on your academic abilities and talents.

Myths (Misconceptions) About the Relationship Between Majors & Careers

Good decisions are informed decisions that are based on accurate information, rather than misconceptions or myths. Since there is a relationship between majors and careers, to be able to plan effectively for a college major, you first need to have an accurate understanding of this relationship. Described below are some common myths about the relationship between majors and careers that can lead to uninformed or unrealistic choices of a college major.

* Myth #1. When you choose your major, you’re choosing your career.

While some majors lead directly to a particular career, most do not. Those majors that do lead directly to specific careers are often called “pre-professional majors,” which include such fields as accounting, engineering, and nursing. However, the vast majority of college majors do not channel you directly down one particular career path. Instead, they leave you with a variety of career options. The career path of most college graduates is not like walking a straight line or taking a single-track monorail ride directly from your major to your career. For instance, all physics majors do not become physicists, all philosophy majors do not become philosophers, all history majors do not become historians, and all English majors become not become Englishmen (or Englishwomen). The trip from your college experience to your eventual career(s) is more like climbing a tree. You begin with the tree’s trunk—the foundation of liberal arts (general education), which grows into separate limbs—choices for college majors (academic specializations), which in turn, lead to different branches—different career paths or options.

Branches (careers) do grow from the same limb (major), so typically a particular major will lead to a group or “family” of related careers. For example, an English major will often lead to careers that involve use of the written language (e.g., editing, journalism, publishing), while a major in Art will often lead to careers that involve use of visual
media (e.g., illustration, graphic design, art therapy). The website, MyMajors.com, provides useful information on what groups or families of jobs tend to be related to different majors.

Furthermore, different majors can lead to the same career. For instance, many different majors can lead a student to law school and to an eventual career as a lawyer. (There really is no law or pre-law major.) Similarly, there really is no “pre-med” major. Students interested in going to medical school after college typically major in some field in the natural sciences (e.g., biology or chemistry); however, it is possible for students to go to medical school with majors in other fields, particularly if they take and do well in certain science courses that are emphasized in medical school (e.g., General Biology, General Chemistry, Organic and Inorganic Chemistry). Just as the same major can lead to different careers, so too can different majors lead to the same career. Said in another way, you can reach the same destination (career) by taking different routes (majors), and you can take the same route (major) to reach different destinations (careers).

The key point we are making here is that the relationship between most majors and careers is not a one-to-one relationship. Your major does not equal your career (major ≠ career), nor does your major automatically turn into your career (major → career). So, do not assume that choosing your college major means that you’re choosing what you will do for a living for the remainder of your working life. One reason why some students may procrastinate about choosing a major is because they think they are making a lifelong decision, and if they make the “wrong” one, they will be stuck doing something they hate for the rest of their lives.

Research on college graduates indicates that they change careers numerous times, and the further they continue along their career path, the more likely they end-up working in a field that is unrelated to their college major (Millard, 2004). While, this may seem hard to believe, remember that the liberal arts curriculum is a significant part of your college education and the many different subjects it exposes you to, plus the key skills it helps you develop (e.g., writing, speaking, organizing), serve to quality you for a number of different careers—regardless of what your particular major happens to be. The key point to remember here is that deciding on a major and deciding on a career are typically different decisions that are made at different times. The order in which decisions about majors and careers are covered in this book reflects the order that they are made in life: First, you make a decision about your major, and later, you make a decision about your career. Although it is important to think about the relationship between your choice of major and your choice of career(s), these are not identical choices that are made simultaneously. Both choices do relate to your future goals, but they involve different timeframes: Choosing your major is a short-range goal, whereas choosing your career is a long-range goal.

* Myth #2. If you want to continue your education after college, you must continue in the same field of study that you majored in during college.

After college graduation, you have two main options or alternative paths available to you: (a) you can enter a career immediately, or (b) you can continue your education in graduate school or professional school. (On the following page, see Figure 4. for a visual map of the signposts or stages in the college experience and the basic paths available to you after college graduation.) Once you complete your bachelor’s degree, you can
continue your education in the same field as your college major, or in a field that is *different* than your college major. For example, if you major in English, you can still go to graduate school in a subject other than English (e.g., Political Science), or go to Law School, or get a Master’s Degree in Business Administration. In fact, it is common to find that the majority of graduate students in MBA (Master’s of Business Administration) programs were not Business majors in college (Dupuy & Vance, 1996).