

# Choosing a Major: Common Misconceptions

Students often begin their exploration of majors with preconceived ideas about the best ways to go about choosing a major and about what impact that choice will have. Unfortunately, many of these ideas are misconceptions that can deter real progress.

Listed below are some of the most common misconceptions about choosing a major and an explanation of how they can cloud your educational vision.

**Misconception #1:** *The best way to find out about majors is to take courses.*

Taking an introductory course is one way to learn about a particular major, but it may not be the best way, especially if you are just beginning the exploration process. Here are some reasons why:

1. If you take a course just to learn more about a major and then decide against that major, you will have eliminated one major but you will not have selected one. Deciding on majors by eliminating them one course at a time is inefficient and time-consuming.
2. Most universities are more concerned with the pre-major requirements rather than general education. They want to see that you have a knack for the major before accepting you into their program.
3. You can often learn a great deal about a course and a major just by browsing through the required textbooks, reading the course syllabi, or sitting in on a few class meetings before deciding whether or not to take a course in that major.

**Misconception #2:** *I'll just get my General Education out of the way first.*

General Education requirements are not the same for every major. Here are just a few examples:

1. Different schools will likely have different pre major and/or general education requirements for the same major. For a local example, UC Berkeley's Haas School of Business details very specific general education courses they want students to have complete prior to transfer while SFSU prefers transfer students majoring in business to complete either the CSU General Education Breadth pattern or IGETC.
2. For students majoring in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) fields, general education can be tricky and following IGETC will not be the best path. Because these tend to be high unit majors, the general education requirements are minimal, and often specific. To not prolong your studies at a community college prior to transfer, a student interested in STEM will have to plan general education courses very carefully.
3. You can see that while you are exploring majors, you should select your General Education Courses very carefully, especially if you are interested in a high unit major. Your counselor should be able to assist you in this selection process.

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**Misconception #3:** *Picking a major and a career are the same thing.*

When students talk about choosing a major, they often mean choosing a career (and vice-versa). Although these two choices can go hand-in-hand, choosing one does not automatically mean you have chosen the other. Here are just a few examples:

1. Some people assume that students who major in the arts, humanities, or social sciences are either not qualified for any jobs ("What can you do with a degree in philosophy?") or qualified only for careers in those specific areas. Actually, students who earn undergraduate degrees in theatre, history, psychology, and similar majors find jobs in business, research, human resources, teaching, the military, and a variety of other occupations.
2. Many students who decide on a career in law automatically assume that they should major in pre-law, political science, or administration of justice. The reality is that a student can choose any major and still be accepted into law school. A student in the College of Agricultural Sciences, for example, might be planning a career in environmental law, while a student majoring in a business might be interested in corporate law.

Choosing a major does not limit you to only one career choice; choosing a career does not limit you to only one major.

**Misconception #4:** *Choosing one major means giving up all the others.*

There are a variety of ways for students to combine their interests in more than one major. It is possible, for example, for students to complete simultaneous degrees, or to have a double major. Most Universities also offer many different minors which often can be completed in little or no extra time or credits. Many schools also offer interdisciplinary studies, or student-designed majors, wherein students are able to create their own major with faculty approval.

Sometimes students who investigate the requirements for combining majors/degrees decide instead to complete just one undergraduate degree and then go on for a master's degree. Post-baccalaureate degrees do not have to be in the same area as undergraduate degrees. A student who earns a bachelor's degree in music, for example, might go on to earn a master's degree in business administration. A student with an undergraduate degree in mathematics, on the other hand, might go on to earn a post-baccalaureate teaching certificate or a master's degree in computer science.

Other ways to combine interests in several different majors is to double major, have a minor, or choose a school that allows students to design their own major.

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**Misconception #5:** *The major I pick now will determine my lifelong career.*

Studies have shown that within ten years after graduation most people are working in careers that are not directly connected to their undergraduate majors.

Just as some students change their minds about their majors, some graduates change their minds about their careers. There are physicians, for example, who decide to become lawyers and lawyers who decide to become physicians. These are obviously unusual examples. More commonly, however, people change their jobs while remaining in a related occupational area (a teacher, for example, might become a principal or a superintendent within in a school district, or an engineer might move into a management position in an engineering firm).

Jobs also change over time, whether people want them to or not. Many jobs that exist today will be performed in very different ways five years from now or may even be obsolete by then. New types of jobs are emerging every year, and most of us have no way of knowing what those jobs will be or what type of education will be needed in order to qualify for them. Consequently, the current emphasis in career planning at the undergraduate level is on the development of general, transferable skills (writing, speaking, computer, problem-solving, team-building) that employers want and that graduates will need in order to adjust to rapidly changing careers.

People change; careers change. The connection between the major that you select now and the career that you will find yourself in ten years from now is likely to be very thin indeed.