



The Dilemma of Choosing a Major

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The selection of a major is one of the most perplexing tasks faced by college applicants. Most institutions offer from 50 to 100 programs of study. Options can be found in schools of business, science, humanities, art and professional studies. Coupled with the diversity of options is tremendous social pressure to follow the “well-worn path to success.”

It has been suggested in the popular press that the “American way” demands the selection of a career path at a very early age. Decisions made later in life are singularly dedicated to making the best out of that career. The efficient life involves few courses beyond the major, few employment activities outside of the career stream and few social activities disconnected from individuals on the career ladder.

“The well-worn path” may be an illusion. While popularized in the media, this pattern does not fit the vast majority of successful individuals. Ask family members if their current life reflects their early aspirations. Did Abraham Lincoln aspire to the presidency, or even politics, as a young man living in Kentucky? At what age did Sam Walton aspire to revolutionize merchandising in America? When were the seeds of the great American Novel planted in the thoughts of Ernest Hemingway? Did Steve Jobs plan for an industry-leading career in technology?

Did America’s leaders chart an efficient path to their accomplishments? Lincoln was not a political science major. He was a rail splitter, engineer and lawyer. Sam Walton had several business failures before succeeding with Walmart. Hemingway was a journalist by training and trade. Steve Jobs’ formal education in technology would pale in comparison to offerings available in America’s great universities.

We anticipate critical moments of our life no better than we predict the direction of the stock market or tumbles of the one-armed bandit’s drums. Unforeseen events have a way of derailing our best aspirations. The same

events set the course for new adventures. Disappointments become opportunities, hobbies become professions and trivial events become life shaping. We are shaped by somewhat uncontrollable events. Only at the end of

major milestones do we define the paths taken. Did Ronald Reagan work as an actor to acquire media skills that supported his political goals? Or was his effectiveness in politics attributed to these experiences only in retrospect?

Approach the selection of the major thoughtfully, calmly and rationally. The decision you make will not be the end all in your life. The initial

selection of a major will not assure an efficient career path, social standing or economic security. You will have a lifetime to attain these goals, and they will only be realized in retrospect. Many of the majors in America’s great universities can serve as a foundation for this pursuit.

Balance the old cliché “What can you do with that major” with “What am I good at?” “What do I enjoy doing?” “What makes me and those I care about proud?” Many majors do not offer a clear and efficient career path. Who plans to be president of a corporation ... or of a country? The major qualifications for leadership in America is seldom defined through objectives in a professional sequence. All will agree, however, that they include essential abilities found in a liberal arts curriculum; clear spoken and written communication, quantitative skill, effective decision making and an appreciation for the contributions of others.

If you enjoy math, are good at math and proud to be known as a mathematician, why not pursue a degree in math? What about philosophy? Physics? Languages? Anthropology? The absence of a clear and efficient career path should not be a deterrent. At the end of a long and successful career, you will recognize that these disciplines laid a foundation for achievements not easily anticipated.

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