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Six Myths About Choosing a College Major

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By JEFFREY J. SELINGO NOV. 3, 2017

Many colleges ask you to choose a major as early as your senior year of high school, on your admissions application. Yet there's a good chance you'll change your mind. The Education Department says that about 30 percent of students switch majors at least once.

Students get plenty of advice about picking a major. It turns out, though, that most of it is from family and friends, according to a September Gallup survey. Only 11 percent had sought guidance from a high school counselor, and 28 percent from a college adviser. And most didn't think that the advice was especially helpful. Maybe it's because much of the conventional thinking about majors is wrong.

Myth 1: For the big money, STEM always delivers.

It's true that computer science and engineering top all the pay rankings, but salaries within specific majors vary greatly.

"Students and parents have a pretty good idea of what majors pay the most, but they have a poor sense of the magnitude of the differences within the major," said Douglas A. Webber, an associate professor of economics at Temple University who studies earnings by academic field. He points to one example: The top quarter of

earners who majored in English make more over their lifetimes than the bottom quarter of chemical engineers.

But what if you never make it to the top of the pay scale? Even English or history graduates who make just above the median lifetime earnings for their major do pretty well when compared to typical graduates in business or a STEM field.

Take the median lifetime earnings of business majors, the most popular undergraduate degree. The typical graduate earns \$2.86 million over a lifetime. When you put business graduates side by side with those who graduated with what are considered low-paying majors, you'll see that those who are slightly above the median salary in their fields are not that far behind the business grads. For example, an English major in the 60th percentile makes \$2.76 million in a lifetime, a major in psychology \$2.57 million and a history major \$2.64 million.

Myth 2: Women want to have it all.

Women are now the clear majority on college campuses, making up 56 percent of students enrolled this fall. They are also more likely than men to graduate.

But when it comes to selecting a major, what women choose tends to segregate them into lower paying fields, such as education and social services, according to a report that Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce will publish later this year. Just look at some of the highest paying fields and the proportion of women who major in them: business economics (31 percent), chemical engineering (28 percent), computer science (20 percent), electrical engineering (10 percent), mechanical engineering (8 percent).

"Women can't win even as they dominate at every level of higher education," said Anthony P. Carnevale, director of the Georgetown center.

Dr. Carnevale wouldn't speculate as to why women make their choices. But he notes that if the proportion of women in fields where men dominate increased by just 10 percent, the gender pay gap would narrow considerably: from 78 cents paid to women for every dollar men receive to 90 cents for every dollar men receive.

Myth 3: Choice of major matters more than choice of college.

Not so. In seven states — Arkansas, Colorado, Minnesota, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia and Washington — students can search public databases for early earnings of graduates of institutions within the state. And those databases show that students who graduate from more selective schools tend to make more money. After all, the better the college, the better the professional network opportunities, through alumni, parents of classmates and eventually classmates themselves.

These undergraduates are more able to pursue majors in lower paying fields because their networks help them land good jobs. Arts, humanities and social science majors are more prevalent on elite campuses than at second-tier colleges, where students tend to pick vocational majors like business, education and health. In all, more than half of students at less selective schools major in career-focused subjects; at elite schools, less than a quarter do, according to an analysis by the website FiveThirtyEight of the 78 “most selective schools” in Barron’s rankings, compared with 1,800 “less selective schools.”

“Students at selective colleges are allowed to explore their intellectual curiosity as undergraduates because they will get their job training in graduate school or have access to a network that gets them top jobs, regardless of their undergraduate major,” Dr. Carnevale said.

They are also more likely to have two majors than students at second-tier colleges, who tend to be more financially needy and have to work, affording less time to double major.

One tip: Complementary majors with overlapping requirements are easier to juggle, but two unrelated majors probably yield bigger gains in the job market, said Richard N. Pitt, an associate professor of sociology at Vanderbilt University who has studied the rise of the double major. “It increases your breadth of knowledge,” he said.

Myth 4: Liberal arts majors are unemployable.

The liberal arts is a favorite target of politicians, with the latest salvo coming from the governor of Kentucky, Matt Bevin. “If you’re studying interpretive dance, God bless you, but there’s not a lot of jobs right now in America looking for people with that as a skill set,” Governor Bevin said in a speech in September.

Interpretive dance may not be in demand, but the competencies that liberal arts majors emphasize — writing, synthesis, problem solving — are sought after by employers. A 2017 study by David J. Deming, an associate professor of education and economics at Harvard, found jobs requiring both the so-called soft skills and thinking skills have seen the largest growth in employment and pay in the last three decades.

One knock on the liberal arts is that it’s difficult to find a first job. But a study by Burning Glass Technologies, a Boston-based company that analyzes job-market trends, concluded that if liberal arts graduates gain proficiency in one of eight technical skills, such as social media or data analysis, their prospects of landing entry-level jobs increase substantially.

The long-held belief by parents and students that liberal arts graduates are unemployable ignores the reality of the modern economy, where jobs require a mix of skills not easily packaged in a college major, said George Anders, author of “You Can Do Anything: The Surprising Power of a ‘Useless’ Liberal Arts Education.” In his book, Mr. Anders profiles graduates with degrees in philosophy, sociology and linguistics in jobs as diverse as sales, finance and market research.

“Once C.E.O.s see liberal arts graduates in action,” Mr. Anders said, “they come aboard to the idea that they need more of them.”

Myth 5: It’s important to choose a major early.

Why settle on a field of study before experiencing the smorgasbord college has to offer, be it study abroad, a club activity or a surprising elective?

Of students who said they felt committed to their major when they arrived on campus, 20 percent had selected a new major by the end of their first year, according to a national survey by the University of California, Los Angeles.

Changing majors can cost you a semester or two, especially if you switch to one unrelated to your first choice. To reduce that risk, several schools, including Arizona State University, Georgia State University and Lehman College in the Bronx, have created “meta-majors,” which group majors under a larger academic umbrella.

“We have moved away from trying to get students to choose their majors as they enter,” said Timothy Renick, Georgia State’s vice provost and vice president for enrollment management and student success.

Instead, all incoming students choose from one of seven meta-majors, representing large academic and work force fields, such as business, education and STEM. First semester, students gather in learning communities and register for a block of general-education courses within that meta-major. Programming is designed so that students get to know the differences between majors within the field.

“Students in our business meta-major get to understand the difference between finance, accounting, management and marketing so they can choose their major from an informed perspective,” Dr. Renick said. They usually do by the end of their first year.

Myth 6: You need a major.

A handful of colleges, including Indiana University and the Evergreen State College, offer the option to ignore the official list of majors and design a course of study. Will Shortz, the crossword puzzle editor for The Times, designed his at Indiana — enigmatology.

“Majors are artificial and restrictive,” said Christine Ortiz, a dean at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology on leave to design a new nonprofit university that will have no majors, and also no lectures or classrooms.

“Majors result from the academic structure of the university, tied to the classic academic disciplines. There is no reason they need to be boxed up like that. They don’t take into account emerging fields that cross disciplines.”

Majors tend to lag behind changes in the workplace. No wonder fewer than a third of college graduates work in jobs related to their majors. And picking one based on today's in-demand jobs is risky, said Dr. Webber of Temple, especially if the occupation is threatened by automation.

"I would argue against majoring in accounting," he said, "or anything that a computer can be programmed to do."

Jeffrey J. Selingo is the author of "There Is Life After College: What Parents and Students Should Know About Navigating School to Prepare for the Jobs of Tomorrow."

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