

# The 10 Biggest Mistakes in Picking a Major

Adapted from *U.S. News & World Report "Professors' Guide"* by L. Jacobs & J. Hyman  
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For many students, picking a major is the single biggest academic decision they'll make in their college career. It's also the one most fraught with mistakes, ranging from picking at the wrong time to picking for the wrong reasons. So, here are ten of the most common—and most costly—mistakes students make in picking a major (and advice on how to avoid them):

**1. Picking a major too early.** Many students feel under pressure to declare a major before summer orientation or early in the first year. They believe they will get guaranteed places in classes and a quicker trip to a degree. But college is really different from high school, and subjects you disliked in high school might well be a lot more interesting in college.

Advice? Remain undecided for at least the first year of college. Take your foundational core courses to prepare you for your eventual major and minor, and get started in intro classes in disciplines in which you might want to major.

Explore. Discover your talents and passions.

**2. Picking a major before you've considered all the choices.** There are more than 60 majors to choose from at B-W. Don't choose before you've considered all the options you're interested in. And don't be put off just because you don't quite know what Public Relations, Philosophy, or Chemistry-Based Pre-Engineering are. Find out. Take a course. Or at least stop by the departmental office or Web page and get a description of what they have to offer.

**3. Picking a major before you've taken at least two advanced courses in the field.** It's tempting to pick a major just on the basis of an intro course or two that you really like. But it's important to take a sampling of upper division or advanced

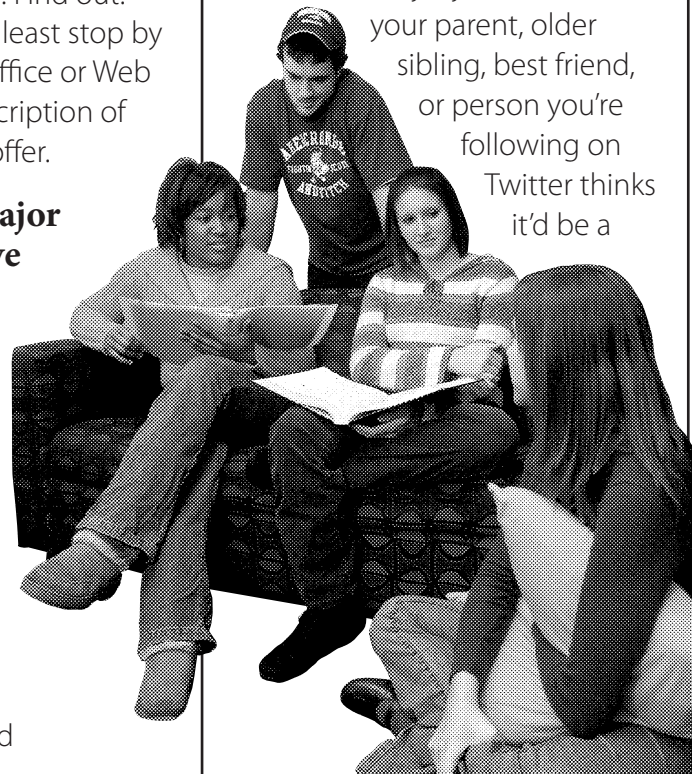
courses before committing to a major. In many fields, the work at that level is more challenging and also, sometimes, different in approach, methodology, or complexity than in the intro courses.

**4. Picking a major in something you're not good at.** As surprising as it might seem, some students choose majors in fields they aren't doing well in or don't have the skills for.

Rule of thumb (if possible): Pick a major in a field in which you're getting more A's than B's.

**5. Picking a major in something you don't like.** Given that you're going to have to take 10 or 12 courses in your major, it'd be nice if you actually liked the field. Pick something that reflects your interests and true passions.

Extra Mistake: Picking a major to please someone else. Never pick a major just because your parent, older sibling, best friend, or person you're following on Twitter thinks it'd be a



great idea to major in that field. They're not the one who'll have to go to the 8:00 a.m. courses that are required for the major (though they will be the one you're steaming at as you sit through those courses).

## **6. Picking a major because you are enthralled by one professor.**

A major is going to require you to study with a broad variety of professors, so take classes with a few professors to determine if you will feel at home in the department.

## **7. Picking a major only because of its career prospects.**

Sure, in a tight economy it makes good sense to pick a major with an eye to what jobs you can get. But that shouldn't be the only consideration in picking a major. For one thing, there's not a one-to-one relation between majors and careers: You don't need a degree in marketing or business for a career in the corporate world or a major in philosophy or political science to have the inside track to law school. Indeed, most jobs don't require a particular major, but what they do require are skills in writing, communication, math, foreign languages, or analytical thinking—skills that can be acquired in any number of different majors.

Also, it's very difficult to bet on what the most lucrative or prestigious jobs will be three to ten years from now or the amount of time needed to complete a major and, in some cases, postgraduate training. Maybe you think disease mapper, robot programmer,

information engineer, radiosurgeon, and Second Life lawyer will be five of the hottest careers in years to come (according to *CNN Money*).

But what will happen

when programming is wholly outsourced to India, surgery is done by physicians working for a nationalized health service, and Second Life has gone the way of Pac Man?

## **8. Picking the wrong major for the career you want.**

There are some majors that just don't work with some careers. You don't want to be the student who would like to teach on the collegiate level, but who unwittingly majors in education (intended for elementary-school teachers), or a would-be missionary about to major in sociology (a field in which mission work is a complete no-no).

Most majors go with a variety of careers, but if you're matching a major to a career, be sure to ask an expert in the field—for example, a favorite professor or your advisor—for advice.

## **9. Piling on majors.**

Despite urban legend, there's no advantage in being a double major—and there can be disadvantages. You get smothered under requirements, and you can end up taking many courses that aren't of interest to you or of value for your career.



Be resolute. Pick one major. Don't externalize whatever indecision or inner conflict you have by doubling (or tripling) up on majors.

Extra Pointer—There is no cachet in piling on an extra minor, either. It's usually a better idea to pick the additional courses that interest you or support your major rather than taking an additional minor.

## **10. Obsessing every waking hour about what major you're going to pick.**

Don't tie yourself into knots by thinking that your choice of major is a bigger commitment than it is. Your major does not dictate your future or put you onto a career path from which there is no escape. The U.S. Department of Labor statistics show that average American workers change careers three to five times in their lifetime. So, relax. Make your best pick, and enjoy where life takes you.

### **Need help choosing a major (or a minor)?**

Please contact:

The Baldwin-Wallace College  
Office of Academic Advising  
440.826.2188  
advising@bw.edu