Some Common Myths about Choosing a Major

Most students begin exploring majors with some preconceived ideas about how to choose a major and about the impact that choice will have on their lives. Unfortunately, many of these ideas are really just myths and misconceptions.

Listed below are some common myths about choosing a major and examples of why these ideas are wrong.

**Myth #1:** The best way to find out about a major is to take courses in it.

Scheduling an introductory course is one way to learn about a particular major, but it may not be the best way, especially if you’re just starting the exploration process. Here’s why:

1. Some introductory courses will not give you a good idea of what the major is like. For example, taking a non-technical introductory course in astronomy won’t tell you just how much math and physics are involved in the Astronomy and Astrophysics major.

2. Sometimes it's impossible for students to schedule courses in a major until after they're actually enrolled in that major. (That could be as late as the junior year.)

3. If you schedule a course just to learn more about a major and then decide not to choose that major, you'll have eliminated one major but you won't have chosen one. Deciding on majors by eliminating them one course at a time is inefficient and time-consuming.

4. You can often learn a lot about a course and a major just by looking through the required textbooks, reading the course syllabus, and sitting in on a few class meetings before deciding whether or not to schedule a course in that major.
Myth #2: Picking a major and a career are the same thing.

Students often think that choosing a major is the same thing as choosing a career (and vice-versa). Although these two choices are related, choosing one doesn't automatically mean you've 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 major in theatre, anthropology, history, psychology, and similar majors do find jobs in business, research, human resources, teaching, the military, and a variety of other occupations.

2. Many students who decide they want to be a lawyer automatically assume that they should major in pre-law. The reality is that a student can choose any major and still be accepted into law school. (By the way, Penn State doesn't even have a pre-law major.)

3. Many students who decide they want to be a doctor assume they should major in pre-med. But students can major in many different areas and still qualify for medical school, as long as they take the right courses, do well on the Medical College Admission Test, etc. In fact, students who are planning to go to med school are often advised not to major in pre-med, in case they decide later not to go to med school or they don't get accepted into med school. Choosing a major other than pre-med can often give students more options after they graduate.

4. Students graduating from any one major could be employed in many different jobs; likewise, people who are employed in any one job could have graduated from many different majors.

Choosing a major doesn't limit you to just one career; choosing a career doesn't limit you to just one major.

Myth #3: Choosing one major means giving up all the others.

Actually, there are ways for students to combine interests in more than one major. It's possible, for example, for students to complete concurrent majors (often called "double majors") or sequential majors. Penn State also offers many different minors, which can often be completed in little or no extra time or credits.
Sometimes students who find out how much time it would take to complete multiple majors decide instead to complete just one undergraduate major and then go on for a master's degree in another area. Graduate degrees don't have to be in the same area as undergraduate degrees. For example, a student who earns a bachelor's degree in music might go on to earn a master's degree in business administration. Or a student with an undergraduate degree in mathematics might go on to earn a post-baccalaureate teaching certificate or a master's degree in computer science.

Another way to combine interests in several different majors is through programs such as the Letters, Arts, and Sciences major in the College of the Liberal Arts, the Integrative Arts major in the College of Arts and Architecture, and the inter-college Bachelor of Philosophy degree. These programs provide flexibility for students who are interested in designing their own specialized undergraduate majors.

Myth #4: My major will determine what I do for the rest of my life.

Did you know that studies have shown that within ten years after graduation, most people are working in careers that aren't directly related to their undergraduate majors?

Just like students change their majors, graduates change their careers. There are doctors, for example, who decide to become lawyers, and lawyers who decide to become doctors. Although these are unusual examples, it's not unusual for most people to change careers several times during their professional lives. A teacher, for example, might become a principal or a superintendent, or an engineer might move into a management position.

Most jobs also change over time, whether people want them to or not. Many jobs that exist today will be very different 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.

The current emphasis in career planning at the undergraduate level is on the development of general, transferrable skills (e.g., writing, speaking, critical thinking, computer literacy, 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 choose now and the career that you'll find yourself in ten years from now is likely to be very small.

Source: http://www.psu.edu/dus/md/mdmisper.htm