

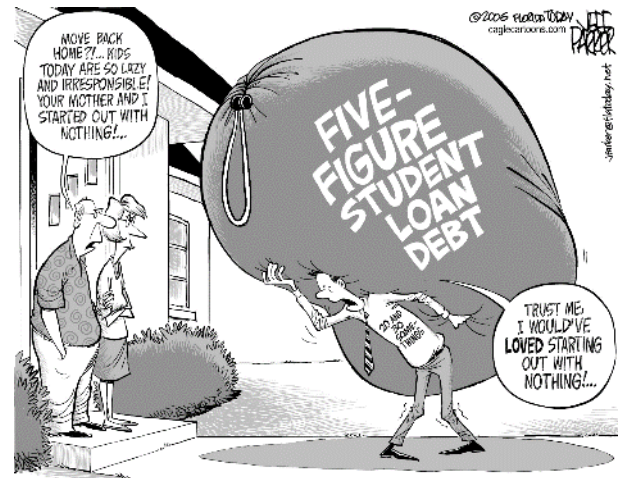
Careers and Choosing a Major

Why You Have Been Assigned to Read this *Two-part* Article



Folks/People/Guys: The real value of going to college is that it allows you to choose how you are going to put bread on the table *for the rest of your life*, and not how much money you are going to make! Millions around the world do not have this privilege. They are unable to go to college for one reason or another (war, poverty, lack of opportunity, etc.) Choose a major that you will be passionate about (even if you end up earning a little less than those whose only ambition is to make as much money as they can at careers whose highlight for them will only be TGIFs—meaning living for weekends). Often, when students first come to this school they are unaware of the rich variety of fields of study that exist on this campus. Do some research by going to the www.buffalo.edu website and visiting its “Academics” page. Moreover, I encourage you to also minor in a non-STEM field to broaden your intellectual horizons and to facilitate engagement with **civil society**, without which a **democratic** society cannot survive.

Note: Some students arrive here with intellectually unrealistic expectations of majoring in a STEM field. However, it would be better for them to major in a non-STEM field (e.g. various majors offered by UB's Department of Transnational Studies), instead of dropping out of college altogether because of a mistaken sense of not being college-worthy due to poor pre-college advisement by high school counselors and/or parents. By the way, a question for ya: if you weren't that good in science and math in high school, which genius convinced you that it will all change here at UB? In other words, choose the right major that goes with your intellectual capabilities; but whatever you do, don't drop out of UB! You have already managed to come really far--and I salute you for that. This is a two-part article: read both parts. (STEM = Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math)



Part 1

Money Is a Terrible Way to Measure the Value of a College Major

Yes, students need to understand what skills are marketable. But they also need to study subjects that keep them engaged enough to graduate.

[Jordan Weissmann](#) Jan 23 2014, 1:29 PM ET

Source: The Atlantic

<http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2014/01/money-is-a-terrible-way-to-measure-the-value-of-a-college-major/283290/>

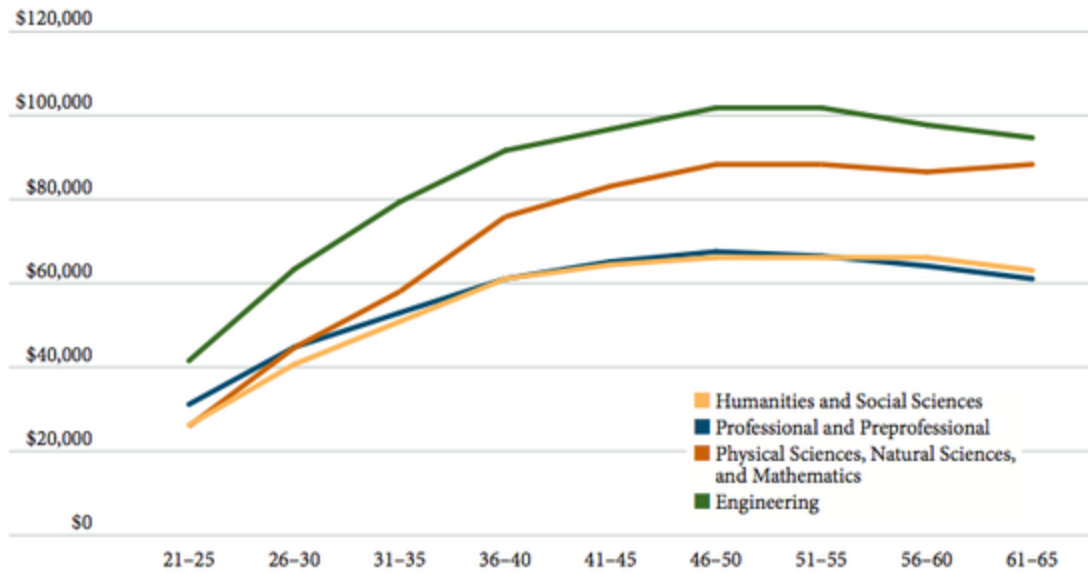


Reuters

The cliché about majoring in humanities is that it's a lovely way to spend four years of college and poor way to land a lucrative job. To some extent, that cliché may be true. On the whole, humanities grads earn less than students who study disciplines like business or engineering. So sayeth the statistics.

But the Association of American Colleges and Universities would like you to know that getting a degree in English or History, while perhaps not the *most* financially rewarding choice, doesn't require an oath of poverty either. Over a lifetime, they note, typical humanities and social science majors earn similarly to graduates who study practical, pre-professional fields such as education or nursing.

FIGURE 4. Median annual earnings for college graduates, by age-group and area of undergraduate major (2010–11)



SOURCE: Data from US Census Bureau, 2012 American Community Survey.
NOTE: This figure depicts median earnings for those employed full time (35+ hours per week).

If you subtract out workers with graduate degrees, humanities and social science students fare a bit worse, but not by much.

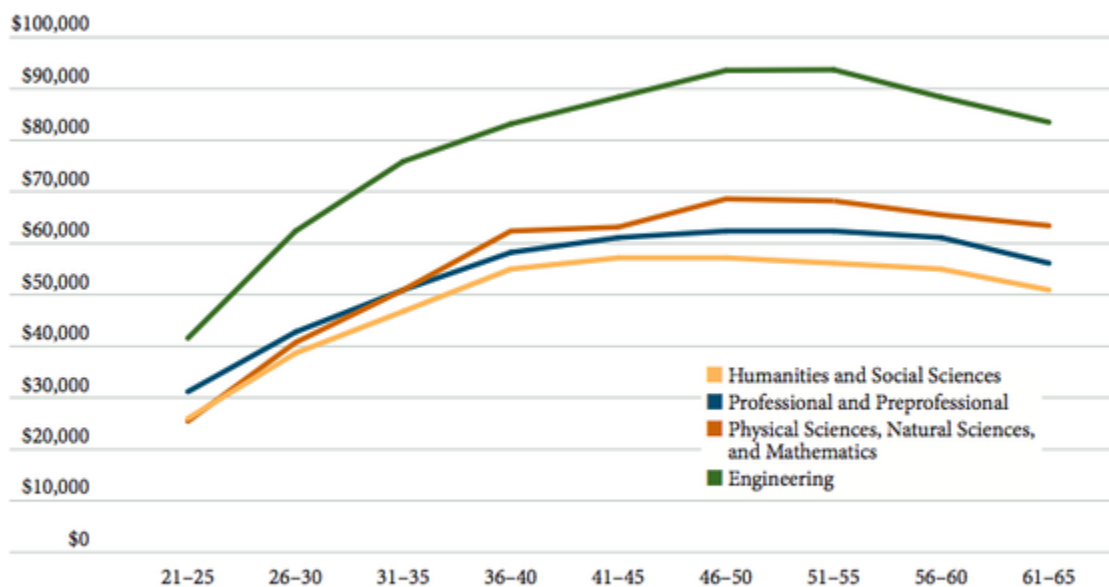
I'm sympathetic to this effort. It sort of misleadingly lumps humanities and social science grads together, but in general, the media tends to overemphasize the [differences](#) between college majors when it comes to career outcomes. That message needs more

corrective.

That said, I want to address an underlying problem with this whole debate. While it's important for college students to understand which majors are most marketable, this creeping notion that college majors should be valued mostly based on what the median or average graduate earns is very, very wrongheaded.

One reason English majors tend to earn less than business majors, for instance, is that many lit-loving 18 year olds aren't particularly

FIGURE 6. Median annual earnings for college graduates with a baccalaureate degree only, by age-group and area of undergraduate major (2010–11)



SOURCE: Data from US Census Bureau, 2012 American Community Survey.
NOTE: This chart depicts median annual earnings only for graduates employed full time (35+ hours per week) for whom the baccalaureate degree was the highest degree earned.

motivated by money, and want careers in, say, PR or journalism (or even teaching!) that are short on pay, but meet their interests. Saying business majors earn more only because of what they studied is like saying having lots of Nike running shoes in your closet makes you a faster runner. No. People who care about their mile times and love to run are more likely to have more running shoes, in the first place. Business majors tend to be more salary-focused than poetry majors. It's a classic self-selection bias.

There's also something to be said for encouraging students to study something that they enjoy, or have a natural talent for. Namely, they're more likely to stick at it. When a bored or frustrated student switches majors, whether it's from engineering to biology or economics to sociology, it often increases their time to degree, which in turn makes it less likely they ever graduate.

You know what's worse than graduating with a hard-to-market art history degree? Not graduating at all.

Again, don't get me wrong: I think it's important for college students to make economically informed decisions about their academic careers. And, if they're considering grad, they should absolutely, positively, without question think about the return on investment, given the additional time and tuition dollars it demands.

But I fear that the more we accept the idea that the value of a particular college major can be summed up with a lifetime earnings estimate, the more likely policy makers are to come up with questionably designed schemes aimed at [pushing students](#) towards one field or another. Recent [screeds aside](#), sometimes "do what you love" is perfectly good advice.

Part 2

What Should I Major In? 10 Essential Questions to Ask Yourself

March 20, 2015 | By Holly Johnson

SOURCE: <http://www.worldwidelearn.com/education-articles/10-questions-for-picking-a-major.html>

A lot's been said about the high cost of a college education. According to figures from the College Board, average tuition and fees for in-state students in the public four-year sector increased to around \$9,139 in the 2014-15 school year. Meanwhile, room and board charges came in at \$9,804. With figures like those, it's no wonder that average student loan debt came in at around \$28,400 per student in 2013. Additionally, Millennials are increasingly putting off major milestones, like buying a house or having children, in order to focus on servicing the student loan ball-and-chain. Still, a degree is no longer a surefire guarantee for employment in this day and age. In fact, the years following the Great Recession have revealed that a bachelor's degree might just be the "new high school diploma" and employers are increasingly seeking out workers that have much more than a degree -- things like experience, connections and special qualities that help them stand out. Choosing the right college major can make a world of difference. But, how do you know how to choose a major? After all, such an important decision must be about much more than stats, figures and pie charts.

Deciding on a major

Of course it's all about the money in some ways, but you should also remember your college major will dictate your life's work and even your future. That said, there are some questions you should ask yourself before you commit to a college major that may just change your life for better or for worse. Here's how to choose your college major:

1. Is this major broad enough to apply to more than one field?

Choosing a college major can be easy if you know exactly what kind of career you want to end up in. Take registered nursing, for example. If you want to be a nurse, you can simply sign up for a [BSN degree program](#) at your school of choice and finish it from beginning to end. What's the problem? If you end up not being a good fit for nursing, however, your degree may not have that much practical benefit for getting a job in another field. That's because, while nursing is a noble profession, the college major that takes you there is highly specialized.

If your heart's set on a major that is specific to an industry, all isn't lost. You should, however, be sure of your choice before you sign up. What if you don't enjoy the field you end up working in? Are there other career trajectories you could embark on after earning a degree in this major? Perhaps a certificate program in another field could help you reinvent yourself after the fact, but these are all questions you should ask yourself.

2. Will I be able to find a job once I graduate?

Following your passion can be a wonderful or not-so-great idea when it comes to choosing a college major. That's because, like it or not, some careers are adding workers over the years and others are staying flat or losing workers.

If you want to find out where your potential career falls on the spectrum, you can start by searching the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) database for career data applicable to your future industry and geographic location. The BLS can show you, for example, that employment for petroleum engineers is expected to increase 26 percent during the next decade, or that jobs for police and detectives are supposed to increase only 5 percent during that same time frame.

Use this kind of publicly available information to get a good idea of where your future industry is headed, and whether or not you'll be able to get your foot in the door.

Guys: Another powerful resource is something called the *Occupational Outlook Handbook*. Make sure you get to know what it is. (I may ask you a question on it.) It is available online here: <http://www.bls.gov/ooh/>

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3. Can I picture myself working in this field for the next 10-30 years?

Let's face it -- even a job you love turns into "work" at a certain point. When you're choosing your college major, one of the biggest questions you should ask yourself is, "can I see myself doing this for the next 20 to 30 years?"

If the answer is yes, ask yourself why that is. Is your answer based on wishful thinking or reality? If your answer is no, it might be time to reevaluate your college major choice and consider a different field altogether. If you thought high school was long, imagine what it's like to do the same thing every day for longer than you've been alive.

4. Is the return-on-investment high enough for this college major?

A college degree isn't just a goal, it's an investment. And unless your parents are footing the bill or you scored a full ride, you need to seriously consider whether the money you're forking over is a good use of those funds.

For example, some college majors cost a ton of money and lead straight to low-paying jobs in industries with slow growth and sluggish earnings. Meanwhile, others lead to careers that pay higher-than-average wages with plenty of room for promotion. As we noted in our feature pieces on [15 Surprisingly Valuable Arts and Literature Majors](#), there are a number of majors, in the arts as well as other disciplines, that offer unique advantages or perks including educational availability, job opportunity for fresh grads and affordability of getting the degree in the first place.

If you want to explore, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) is once again a good place to start. Search careers you're interested in and you can find salary data for last year, including data specific to your state. What you find might surprise you.

5. Does my personality fit the field?

Does your personality fit this major? Hopefully the answer is yes, but wishful thinking may not be enough. For example, many people dream about a fast-paced career in sales yet simply do not have the personality and fortitude to cold call potential clients and put themselves out there.

Other college majors tend to cater to specific personalities as well. For example, computer science and technical writing can be somewhat solitary careers, and those who are outgoing may not enjoy spending much of their time in their own head. Figure out where your personality lies and ask yourself, "is this major a good fit for who I really am?"

6. Will I need to pursue a graduate degree in this field?

Earning a bachelor's degree in psychology is a great way to learn about the human mind, but where will it take you professionally? Realistically, if you want to actually work as a psychologist, you'll typically be required to earn a doctorate in addition to that four-year-degree.

If you choose your college major based solely on your future career, make sure you understand what other requirements you may need to meet in order to get your foot in the door. For example:

- Do you need to earn an advanced, post-grad degree to gain employment?
- Do you need any additional certifications to get started?

Use this information to decide whether your college major is actually a good fit.

7. Would I be better off choosing something more lucrative?

Exploring salary data with the BLS could reveal some things you didn't know about the career that corresponds with your college major of choice. For example, you may have found that it actually pays far less than you realized. Ask yourself, "is that OK?"

If you live in an area with a high cost of living, for example, you are right to worry about a low salary once you graduate. And if you plan to have a family, you are justified if you choose to change majors altogether. After all, you probably won't enjoy your future career as much if it requires a lifetime of struggle. And who wants to live like that?

8. Is this a field I'm going to enjoy?

It's also important to pick a major that isn't related to a field that doesn't match your interests. For example, if you have a serious disdain for math and science, don't pick a college major in engineering simply because you read it pays well. Compensation is more than just salary -- factors like commute, nature of the work, potential for advancement and work-life balance should all be factored into the idea of compensation. You can weight each individual factor against the other based on the kind of lifestyle you're aiming to lead after school.

Likewise, don't be too afraid to do something you love and enjoy just because you won't earn six figures in your first year. There's a difference between finding a career with a terrible earnings forecast and choosing something you love that may not necessarily lead to high income status. Find a balance and choose something that makes you happy.

9. Have you observed others who work in this field?

Do you really know what makes you happy? If you have never seen someone in your future field working on the job, you may not really know for sure. After all, your idea of a career and what it's really like might be two entirely different things.

To find out, try to spend some time shadowing someone who earned a college major in a field you're interested in and find out what their job is really like. What are their hours like? What are the downsides of this career? Has their college major opened many doors for them? Or has it been a hindrance? There's only one way to find out.

10. Will this major lead to a job that fits your lifestyle?

The last component to finding a college major that "fits" is whether or not the field you're choosing will actually fit with the lifestyle you want to live. Take petroleum engineering, for example. Engineering hopefuls maybe be drawn to that major and field simply because earnings are high and the career outlook is bright. However, what many don't know is that many jobs in this line of work require travel and long stints of time away from home compared to other engineering specializations. If you have a family or don't like to travel, that's something to consider.

Again, shadowing is another great way to find out what kind of lifestyle people live after they earn a degree in the major you're interested in. But don't just shadow them at work -- ask how they live. What is their lifestyle like when it comes to work? Is this career conducive to having a family? Do they get plenty of vacation? Do they get benefits? Is this industry "family friendly"? These are all things you should want to know before choosing your major.

Choosing a college major is serious business

When it comes to choosing a major, the questions above are just the tip of the iceberg. Once you start learning more about fields you're interested in, you might become interested in other fields that strike your fancy, maybe even ones you didn't know about before.

So choose wisely and take great care to understand the magnitude of this decision. There's really no "right way" to choose a college major, but there's certainly a wrong one -- choosing your college major without exploring what it really means, or what other options might be out there. Do your research and leave no stone unturned as you seek out answers. And, as always, make sure any decision you make is an informed one.

Sources

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U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Accessed November 2014, <http://www.bls.gov/> NOTE: **Folks:** for your purposes another resource is something called the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* available here: <http://www.bls.gov/ooh/>