



Empowerly's Guide to



CHOOSING A MAJOR

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Introduction



Do you feel stressed about beginning to choose your college major? If so, you're not alone. Many students feel anxious about making a decision which could impact their future lives and careers. While there are a few lucky souls who know exactly what they want to do and seem to have their lives mapped out, lots of others are unsure.

The good news is that there is no pressure to make a decision right away! It's very common for students to change their majors at some point in their college careers. Most schools do not even require you to declare a major until the spring of your sophomore year. In addition, you will usually have the option of declaring a double major or minoring in something else that interests you.

But the choice of a major does impact your employment opportunities after graduation. So if you're feeling completely lost, here are some guidelines to help you navigate this decision.

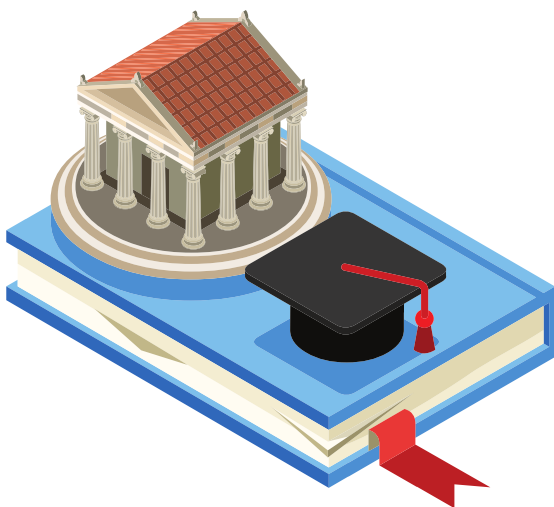
It's Major!

How and Why Your Major Matters

Although it may feel like all of your peers have decided what they want to study in college, an estimated 20 to 50 percent of students enter college without choosing a major, and 75 percent change their major before they graduate. What does this mean for you?

This just emphasizes how wholly acceptable it is to feel uncertain of what you want to pursue in college. In fact, some even think your major is one of the most overhyped parts of college applications! Along with the hype, there are plenty of myths circulating about the process. It's worth finding the truth of the matter.

With that being said, there are definite pros and cons to declaring a major on your application. Take a moment now to consider each side if you're unsure of what to do on your own application.



The Pros to Declaring

- **Financial aid opportunities may increase.**

You may be eligible for academic financial aid, but if you declare a major, especially a major that has a specialized school or program, such as nursing, engineering, the arts, social work, or education for example, you may be eligible for additional aid through these programs.

Similarly, you'll presumably spend less time and money on courses you don't need if you can work towards a major right away. You might spend the money anyway if you change majors, as we'll talk about in the cons, but if you already have an idea of what you want to study, the odds are in your favor.

- **You'll stand out on your application.**

A large number of students apply to college with an undecided or an undeclared major. Although admissions offices do not expect applicants to do so, declaring a major on your application may make you stand out amongst the crowd. This is particularly true if you are underrepresented in your major, such as men in nursing or women in engineering, or if you have selected an unpopular major.

- **Getting into selective classes in college.**

Some classes in college, even if they are required of certain majors, only occur during certain time blocks or in certain semesters. By declaring a major on your application and starting said major in your freshman year, you can make sure you land a spot in these selective yet required classes right away. This will help you to graduate on time and find a job that much sooner.



The Cons to Declaring

- **If you need to build up your grades.**

If your grades were not the greatest in high school, it may be difficult for you to compete against students who declare a major and have the academic proof to back them up. Now, we don't encourage students to [avoid choosing in order to increase their chances](#). Yet, the more selective a major you want to pursue, the harder it'll be to earn admission with lower grades. If you like a major that has a fair number of general education requirements you can complete in your first year of college, there's no rush to commit just yet. Additionally, admissions readers notice if you are applying to majors with high expectations—like pre-med—without being able to back it up.

- **If your resume may not support your desired major.**

Similarly to needing to build up your grades, if you know you want to go into a specialized field but have no experience in that field, it may benefit you to not declare a major on your application. Then, you can spend your first year joining organizations, clubs, and doing volunteer work to support your transition into your major later on.

- **If you genuinely don't know what you want to do.**

If you declare a major on your application simply because you think admissions will be impressed, you'll have a hard time supporting your case. When it comes to the interview and essays, admissions offices want to hear of your passion, your previous work, and your goals in your declared major. Without the interest and the work to back it up, you'll come up short.

It can also be **more difficult to change your mind later on**, as some credits are non-transferable to other majors, but it depends on the school and the program.



- If you want to attend a small liberal arts college.

It's tempting to think that a large university would be the better place to apply for an undeclared major since there are numerous fields of study. However, big universities often can give less care to the undecided student, and their fields of study may reside in highly specialized schools within the university. If you wish to attend a small liberal arts college, however, oftentimes they'll be better equipped to give you individual attention, and to help you transition to a major once you've decided.

Know that, amongst other things, declaring a major on your college application does not intrinsically help you. Whether you are steadfast on pursuing one unique course of study, or would like to sample some classes once you enter college, your major needs to be the right fit for you.

Furthermore, whether you intend to declare a major on your application or not, give a clear picture of who you are, your strengths and interests. Demonstrate that no matter what you major in, you are a strong candidate worthy of acceptance.



Tips for Exploration & Discovery

Do you want to be a scientist? A musician? Have you dreamed of studying history, or would you rather create computer software? Perhaps you've never even considered questions like this before!

No matter where you are starting, we have concrete steps to help you move forward. However, before we dive too deeply, we'd like to provide these guidelines to remember as you work through this section:

- **Separate your goals from other's goals.** Family and friends can suggest or get set on the perfect career for you. From your aunt's suggestion to be a doctor to your best friend's suggestion to be a radio announcer, remember these are suggestions. You need to do what will work best for you. Some close family and friends can have good ideas but take the time to explore possibilities.
- Figure out **what your interests are.** **Take a career test.** Or take a personality test that helps you to understand your disposition. These online tests can reveal your personality so that you can then match that to **a job that would develop into a passion.**
- Look at **future employment opportunities.** Some areas of the job market experience shortages then an abundance of candidates. Other areas require specialized training or an advanced degree. Some careers experience huge growth while others decline. If you want to find a job easily, you should select a major that is experiencing job growth. If you want to just pursue a particular interest, be prepared for actual employment possibilities.



- **Income possibilities can matter.** When you invest money into your education, you hope to get money out. Your future career should be one that allows you to live comfortably. Check into expected incomes for various professions so that you can weigh that with the type of job you picture yourself doing after you graduate from college.



- **Do something you are good at.** After thinking about job growth and income possibilities, it is easy to think you should have a job that makes a lot of money. But high paying jobs often require time to get an advanced degree and work your way up the ladder.

Most people, once they get experience in their career, say job satisfaction is more important than salary. If you like doing something, you usually put more effort into it. So match your interest to your career rather than your wish for money to your career. **And of course be willing to change course to find a life you will really enjoy.**



Stage 1: Beginning

"Help! I'm just starting out."

- Take a community college class in a subject you'd like to explore as a college major.

Though community colleges are typically very different from four-year universities, they will still have a decent variety and follow a lecture format. Not only will a student get to “rehearse” for their college studies, but they can take specialized courses. They could consider an evening course about European History. Or, they might try a class about Criminal Law. The options may not be as abundant—but they will have plenty of courses not offered by a typical high school. All you should do is check with the high school if students can concurrently enroll at a community college.

- Sit in on (or audit) classes at a university in the major you're considering.

Sitting in on a variety of courses can be a very efficient way to get a scope of the different subjects you can take. If you're out visiting colleges, ask the staff if a student could sit in on a couple of classes from different programs. This way, the student could get a feel for the programs and how they differ from one another.

Auditing classes is a different kind of commitment. This is basically when a student can come to every course and participate, but isn't allowed to complete classwork or receive a grade. The professors are typically the ones to approve an audit. This will give students a deeper understanding of the subject, but will require much more commitment. Either way, when doing your college planning, make sure to include this on a pre-graduation checklist!



- **Get out of your comfort zone.**

Now is not the time to take only the basic offerings. Now is the time to look at something wacky or interesting that a student would have never tried before. It's the time to read up on a 'Politics of the Simpsons' course, or get incredibly specific with a subject a student already likes. Interested in studying law? What kind? Corporate? Criminal? This is a chance to get a sense of interest and choose the university that is strongest in those areas.

Stage 2: Intermediate

"Okay, I have ideas but I'm not sure how to narrow it down."

- **Are you interested in a field which requires lots of classes?**

Although you may not be required to declare a major right away, there are many fields of study in which you will need to declare a major early on to be sure that you can fit in all the required coursework. If you are contemplating a career in education, nursing, or engineering, you will probably need to begin your coursework early to finish it. Keep in mind that there is a difference between a major and career training. A major will provide a foundation for a wide range of careers, but some careers require more focus in preparing. In this case, you will want to make sure that all the schools on your [college list](#) offer the coursework that you need.

- **If you could choose any job in the world, what would it be?**

Maybe you have always wanted to be a journalist, or a computer programmer, or an art teacher. This is a good time to explore those options by taking some courses in that field of study and asking lots of questions. [This article](#) provides some further reading about how to learn about jobs in real life!



- **Does earning potential matter?**

If you will be working your way through college or if you need to take on a lot of debt, you want to do some research to find out the likelihood that a particular major will pay off in a lucrative career.

- **What sparks your enthusiasm?**

If you find a particular field of study that excites you, you will work harder and learn more. You are also more likely to build connections which can lead to a successful career. Making such connections while working on a degree in English can lead to a job as a writer, publisher, or college professor. A history major could eventually land a job as a museum curator, lawyer, or archivist. Don't rule out a major if it ignites your passion.



- **Are you interested in graduate school?**

Many schools have a pre-med or a pre-law program specifically to prepare students to go on to medical school or law school. If you know you want to pursue a postgraduate degree, make sure that the courses you choose line up with grad school requirements.

- **What do you value most in a job?**

What is most important to you in your future career? Do you want the opportunity to help others? Do you crave independence and a flexible schedule? Or are things like security and teamwork more important? Fleshing out these preferences now will help you zero in on the field of study and eventually the career that suits you best.

- **What are the obstacles?**

Once you think you know which major most appeals to you, do a realistic assessment of anything standing in your way. Maybe you want to major in Psychology, but you dread the laboratory courses. Maybe your parents have their hearts set on a pre-med degree, but you are much more interested in studying music. Take stock of exactly what all the obstacles are, and determine if and how you can overcome them.





Stage 3: Advanced

"I'm already in college and I'm still not sure!"

Every student is different, and there are plenty of current college students who still don't know what they want to major in. Here are some helpful tips for students applying undecided, and how to discover what major could be the perfect fit.

- **Look into different clubs to figure out what you're interested in.**

Clubs are a really great way to try out new things. They frequently don't require a lot of commitment, they bring together like-minded people, and they're usually very specific. Best of all, you can join clubs in high school and college. If you join the Future Business Leaders of America club in high school, you may discover a love for economics or accounting. Joining clubs in college can expose you to a different network of people from your classmates or roommates. New people might introduce you to different majors, or a club might focus on a subject taught in college, but not in high school, like anthropology. Unlike college or high school classes that require 6 months to a year's commitment, you can swap and change clubs with ease to find a subject that interests you.



- **Go through the list of majors offered at universities before (or after) signing up to go there.**

This may sound like an obvious tip, but it's really easy for students to get swept away by a beautiful campus or a fun student culture, and forget the main focus – studies! By going through the list of majors offered, you may discover ones you didn't know existed like oceanography, adventure education, or nautical archaeology. Some schools offer very specific majors that students may have never heard of, and the more you explore, the more likely you will make an informed choice. I would also recommend looking over the classes offered for each major. This will give you an idea of what subjects make up each major, and could give you ideas about related subjects as well.

- **Reach out to professors and current students to learn more about new subjects.**

Talking to people who are experts in the subject can give you a deeper understanding of the major. For example, psychology majors often have to take statistics as part of their coursework and the work they do can be incredibly analytical. Speaking to a professor can help you understand the research areas and specializations. Students can tell you what they hope to do with the degree. Understanding what goes into a major and what you can do with it once you enter the job market are a very important part of declaring a major.

Always remember that it is possible to go to college without knowing what you're going to major in, or what you're going to do after school. Additionally, if you are [dealing with family pressures](#) to follow one path or another, be sure to address it head on and communicate. Then you can focus on being open to new classes and new experiences! Then, with some determination, you'll find your major.



Double Majoring & More

Multiple majors may seem like a good way to explore. At this point, maybe you're asking yourself, "Should I double major in college?" Let's review the options. As you do your research, consider first what a double major is, and then consider why you would or wouldn't want to do it.

What is a double major?

A **double major** is where you major in two subjects heading towards the same degree. For example, you could major in anthropology and literature to head towards a Bachelor of Arts. This differs from a **dual degree**, where a student studies two majors that result in two totally different degrees, such theater and biology, which would result in a Bachelor of Fine Arts and a Bachelor of Science respectively.

Double Major

Now that we know what a double major is, let's look at the reasons why they can be helpful and harmful as you work through college. First, what are a few reasons someone would want to double major?

You have great interest in two fields.

Maybe you don't have a particular career in mind yet, but you know where your interest lies. Pursuing a double major can be an in-depth way to learn more about different fields. Furthermore, you'll be that much more prepared to enter a certain field if you studied it first.



Both majors have similar classes.

If you're considering pursuing two similar majors, check a course guide to see how similar the class requirements are. Pursuing majors in two different foreign languages, for example, would have all of the same prerequisites. The differences, therefore, would lie primarily in the language classes themselves.

Two majors complement each other.

While some majors may not seem related on the surface, they can still complement each other. A great example of this would be studying the arts and business. While you may not think of combining these subjects on an educational level, pairing them together can give you real options and benefits in the long run.

It could strengthen your ability to achieve your career goals after college.

For students who have a clear understanding of their career goals, they can get ahead by knowing which skills and degrees will help them to achieve these goals. A good example of this would be a student who wishes to pursue a professional degree, such as a medical degree or a law degree. While it would be tempting to study pre-med or pre-law, a student could stand out on an application by instead studying two related degrees, such as biology and chemistry.



On the other hand, there are also drawbacks to taking on two majors at the same time. Next, let's discuss some top reasons to not choose a double major.

You feel pressure to do so from someone else.

Double majors are difficult, and if you pursue one to please a parent or someone else, you'll have a lot of difficulty and stress ahead of you. College is your experience, and making it otherwise will help no one.

You can't afford the time or money it would take to graduate college in the first place.

Pursuing a double major oftentimes requires extra classes, which can mean extra time and money. Many students who pursue double majors even take an extra year to graduate. While it can be difficult to recognize that you can't afford such a commitment, it's also smart in the long run.

You already have some difficulty academically.

Double majors are rigorous, and require a lot of you academically. Students who already have some difficulty staying on top of their grades or coursework may have extra difficulty when another major is involved.



You might have better alternatives than a double major in college.

If you find that you have a number of reasons why double majoring might not be right for you, but you still have interest in another subject, you do have other options. A minor, for example, is a great way to pursue knowledge in another subject without adding on extra prerequisites to your course load. Furthermore, keep in mind there are numerous career tracks that don't necessarily require a particular major; you simply need to have a college degree. If your interest is in a field where this applies, you may be able to take some classes on the subject without the stress of taking on the whole major.

Triple Major

A triple major can either mean three subjects towards one degree or three different subjects towards three different majors. Triple majoring, although hard to achieve, is actually doable at a few select colleges. **However, as counselor Monica G. reminds us, many colleges cap your program at two majors, so don't bank on it.** To learn more, we asked a friend at UC Berkeley, who is majoring in Economics, Political Science, and French, with a minor in German, about his triple major experience.

Example: UC Berkeley Triple Major

So, how many units does he need to take to graduate? Let's calculate it: generally, one major requires 12 courses to graduate. Double major or more allows you to overlap two required courses from a major, which means you will need at least $12 + 10 = 22$ total required courses to graduate with a double major degree. Therefore, a triple major will need to take at least $12 + 10 + 10 = 32$ courses.



In addition, he has a minor in German, which requires 10 courses to declare. In all, a total of $32 + 10 = 42$ courses is demanded for graduation. If the average course is 4 units, a total of $4 \times 42 = 168$ units is expected – if he wants to graduate in 4 years (8 semesters), he'll have to take $168 \text{ units} / 8 \text{ semesters} = 21$ units per semester in order to graduate. For those of you not in college, the expected/average course load at Berkeley is around 15 to 16 units. 21 units is a huge time commitment!

Still deciding?

Additionally, not many people come into college with the intention to triple major, or at least knowing what three majors they want to study. Our friend took discovery classes in his freshman year to finalize what he wanted to study. Thus, it wasn't until the end of his freshman year that he wanted to triple major and in what subjects. As a result, he only had 3 years to complete all his requirements. Instead of 21, he has to take a whopping 28 units per semester in order to graduate on time, in addition to staying at Berkeley for summer classes every year. That's almost double the average amount of units.

This friend even studied abroad his fall semester sophomore year – in the lively, romantic city of Paris, he took 22 units of class! As you can see, studying abroad is not always the fun experience that you hear about (if you decide to triple major, that is).



Steps to Remember

Lastly, the process of declaring triple majors is also very complicated. At Berkeley, you have to get consent from each major department to allow you to major in the three subjects, plan out each semester with the specific classes you are going to take, and get everything signed by your college advisor. And in Berkeley, a large public school, it usually takes more than one month to get three counselors' agreements.

All in all, triple majoring in college can be quite difficult and has plenty of obstacles. It certainly won't be easy; but as you can see, our friend is still willing to go through it all because it's something he truly wants to do! Don't let these things scare you; if you want to triple major, go for it! But just be aware that the road will not be easy.

College gives you the opportunity to explore yourself, your interests, and give you the tools you need to succeed. Therefore, the choice to pursue an additional major comes down to you. Still asking yourself if you should double major in college? If you have a strong understanding of who you are and what you want, then you'll be able to make the right choice for yourself. You can do this.



Understanding Undeclared



Applying to colleges admittedly undecided about your major is actually way harder than centering your application around a focused intended major. You're signing up for a very challenging strategy: persuasion about your unbridled potential, while squashing suspicions that you're aimless. Should you apply to college as an undecided major? Our biggest piece of advice is not to treat "undeclared" or "undecided" as a cop-out for thinking about your decisions in advance.

Should You Apply Undeclared?

I'm Not Looking for Commitment Right Now...

Absolutely not sure what you want to major in? That's okay. You don't need to declare your major as a freshman; most universities have flexible major-switching policies, even if you change your mind after you have declared your major. You are not bound to the major you write about wanting to pursue in your application essay. The department does not admit you: the entire university does.

**"I would say it is okay to be undecided, but not uninterested. [...] In my experience, most kids have an idea of what they like (or what they hate, which is also telling!). Those students can either make a best guess at a future major or choose undecided. If given multiple options, you can also select a combination like 'history, anthropology, undecided' to showcase the fact that you're looking forward to exploring more in college."
- Empowerly Counselor Monica G.**



This [article](#) explains how this translates to the actual application itself. In other words, think forward to a tentative major in order to demonstrate your enthusiasm.



So How Do I Pick A Tentative Major?

Pick a major that makes sense with your extracurriculars. There must be a reason you're in the Science Olympiad, Chemistry Club, and attended Chem-A-Palooza. Okay, it might not be quite that obvious. Find a central theme that ties your extracurricular leadership together. Perhaps you're involved with building houses for low-income families with Habitat for Humanity, and you volunteer translation services at the ER. The common thread there isn't construction, or linguistics; it's advocating for underserved populations. One potential major that would be on brand with those activities would be Public Policy. You can use this information to [help you choose classes](#), as well!

When selecting your tentative major, think about the career you may want someday and work backwards. Since you're equally passionate about many academic disciplines, select one, and discuss how your strengths in other accompanying disciplines would give you an edge on that selected path. For example, if you're interested equally in math, psychology, and business, you could select Economics as a major – marrying math and social psychology – and discuss how your entrepreneurial interests would help you research business growth and labor markets.



How to Strategize as an Undecided Applicant

Still want to apply undecided? Well, if you are using an angular tactic of a tentative major as described above, you can construct your application around your main themes. This will provide the necessary structure for an admissions officer to understand you as a student.

Here are some tips from our featured counselor Monica G. for how to set yourself up for success:

Students should highlight the classes and units that most interested them in high school and discuss potential majors when asked in supplemental essays, even when ticking the undecided box. In that way, they're not truly undecided. This changes the "conversation" as they highlight their potential plans to admissions officers without sounding big-headed or unrealistic.

It also is a way for kids to say "hey, I know people switch majors a lot" and it often makes the applicant sound more realistic and mature.

She continues,

You should not say something like: "I have no idea what I want to do!" However, it is totally cool to say something like... "I've always loved my history class because of the people it chronicles and the global nature of the subject. But, I'm not sure that history will be my major. I'm envisioning taking a number of classes in my first year to help me figure this out.



My hunch is that I'll feel most at home in a department like anthropology or sociology, with a minor in either Japanese or Chinese because I already have a foundation in those languages from having lived abroad when I was in middle school."

If you still have absolutely no idea about what direction you might go, here are some tips for how to go about that. It's a lot more work, though, so be forewarned.

- You'll need to demonstrate aptitude across the board in a wide variety of academics. Therefore, you'll need to submit SAT IIs and AP/IB tests in humanities, math, science, a foreign language, and/or social sciences.
- In addition, you'll also need to package sort of tiered sub-brands (as opposed to just 1 brand) of 2-3 activities that align with one of each of the following tracks: humanities, math, science/ social science.
- You're basically signing up to demonstrate the variety of your skills and equal aptitudes among subjects as a jack of all trades, rather than building a singular focused brand around one intended major.

Extracurriculars

Definitely highlight leadership and awards.

Your message needs to be that you're equally great at everything. You'll need to demonstrate leadership in 70% of your extracurricular activities, plus state and national level awards.

You'll need to demonstrate commitment to the same extracurriculars over long periods of time, not a lot of jumping around or switching gears. Self-driven projects show initiative and decisive action, so you'll need these to counterbalance your confessed indecision.

You'll need to demonstrate equal passion for several different academic disciplines, not equal indifference to all of them.



Essays

Since most majors on a given campus require good writing skills, demonstrating strong writing is a must.

Your essays should persuade an admissions officer that your indecision stems from maturity and open-mindedness. For example, this article presents strong reasons a thoughtful student would not declare a major that may apply to your situation as well.

You could even write about your hopefulness to find an interdisciplinary major on campus that harnesses your competing strengths. If the university you're applying to allows you to design your own major, you could express intrigue in that option and explain how you might integrate studying your varied interests.

Finally, remember that it can be okay. [This real student story](#) shows a great outcome from waiting. This could be you, too. If you're willing to do the legwork, there's no limit to what you can achieve.

Conclusion

Whether you intend to graduate from college with a double major, a dual degree, a single major with a minor, or even a triple major, consider your choices fully. Reading through this guide is a great place to start. And remember, you can always reach out to the Empowerly community for more support. **We believe in you.**

