

From The Liberal Arts, Your College Major, and Your Future Career(s): Myths & Realities

By Joe Cuseo, Marymount College

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* **Discovering yourself and knowing your options should take place before declaring your major and choosing your career.**

One of the primary advantages of taking the wide range of courses that make up the liberal arts curriculum is that they enable you to become more aware of different aspects of yourself, while at the same time, you become more aware of the variety of academic disciplines and subject areas that are available to you as possible majors. Your trip through the liberal arts curriculum will likely result in your discovery of new personal interests and new choices for majors, some of which may be in fields that you didn't even know existed.

Also, your exposure to a wide range of subjects provides you with the general context (the "whole") that is needed to make an intelligent selection of your specific major (one "part" of the whole), and to understand how your particular major connects with or "fits into" the bigger picture. In other words, you need to take a trip through the forest before you can select the right tree. So, look at your trip through the liberal arts curriculum as an exploratory journey in which you are searching to make three key discoveries:

- (a) **discovering** the full range of choices for majors that are available to you,
- (b) **discovering** where your special interests, values, talents, and abilities lie, and
- (c) **discovering** what specialized major best "matches" your special interests, values, talents, and abilities.

Remember that finding yourself and your options should take place before you find a major and future career. **You don't build your life around a major and a career; you build a major and career around your life.** Even if you have already decided on a major, you will still need to explore specialized fields within your major to find one that is most compatible with your personal interests, abilities, and values. For instance, if you have decided to major in communications, you will still need to select what particular field or communication media to specialize in, such as visual media (e.g., film or television), print media (e.g., journalism), or sound media (e.g., radio). Similarly, if you are interested in pursuing a career in law, you will eventually need to decide what branch of law you wish to practice (for example, criminal law, corporate law, or family law).

So, if you have decided on a major field of study, the liberal arts component of your college experience will help you explore specializations within that field by exposing you to a wide variety of subject areas and testing your skills and interests in these areas. Furthermore, your exposure to different fields of study in the liberal arts curriculum may result in your discovery of a second field that interests you, which you may decide to pursue as a *minor* to go along with your major.

As a beginning college student, it is only natural to feel at least somewhat uncertain about your intended major because you have not yet experienced the variety of subjects or fields of study that make up the college curriculum. So, if you are currently uncertain about a major, this is nothing to be embarrassed about. The term "undecided" or "undeclared" doesn't mean that you have somehow failed or are lost, while everybody else has it all figured out. (In fact, the term "undeclared" has acquired such a negative connotation that a TV sitcom about college students was created with that very name. As you may already know or have guessed, this show's episodes focused frequently on first-year college students who were academically clueless, unmotivated, "party animals.")

As a new student, you may be undecided or undeclared for a variety of good reasons that have nothing to do with lack of self-motivation or personal direction and nothing to do with procrastination or indecisiveness. For instance, you may be undecided simply because you have interests in a variety of subjects. This is actually a healthy form of indecision because it shows that you have a broad range of interests and a high level of motivation to learn about different subjects. You may also be undecided simply because you are a careful, reflective thinker whose decision-making style is to gather more information (e.g., by gaining first-hand experience with different subjects) before making any long-term commitments. In one study of students who were undecided about a major when they started college, 43% had several ideas in mind but were not yet ready to commit to one of them (Gordon & Steele, 2003). These students were not "totally clueless;" instead, they had some ideas but still wanted to explore them and keep their options open, which is a very effective way to go about making decisions.

Classic Quote

"All who wander are not lost."

—J. R. R. Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings*