

# Choosing a College Major: How to Chart Your Ideal Path

by Randall S. Hansen, Ph.D.

The most important piece of advice in this article follows this sentence, so please make note of it and repeat it to yourself as often as you need as you read this article and make decisions regarding choosing a major in college. Are you ready for it? The advice: **Don't panic.**

This article is all about giving you some pointers and direction -- some steps for you to take -- in your journey toward discovering that ideal career path for you. But it is a journey, so make sure you spend some time thinking about it before making a decision. And don't be discouraged if you still don't have a major the first time you take this journey...your goal should be narrowing your focus from all possible majors to a few areas that you can then explore in greater depth.

Please also keep in mind that many schools have double majors, some triple majors, and most minors as well as majors. Your major in college is important for your first job after graduation, but studies show that most people will change careers -- yes, careers -- about four or five times over the course of their lives -- and no major exists that can prepare you for that!

The **first** stop on your journey should be an examination or self-assessment of your interests. What types of things excite you? What types of jobs or careers appeal to you? If you are not sure, start the process with an interest inventory or career assessment.

The **second** stop on your journey is an examination of your abilities. What are your strengths? What are your weaknesses? What kind of skills do you have? You can begin this self-examination by looking at the courses you are taking in high school. What are your best subjects? Is there a pattern there? What kinds of extracurricular activities do you participate in while in high school? What kinds of things did you learn from part-time or summer jobs?

The **third** stop on your journey involves examining what you value in work. Examples of values include: helping society, working under pressure, group affiliation, stability, security, status, pacing, working alone or with groups, having a positive impact on others, and many others. Again, a visit to your school counselor or career/college resource room should help.

The **fourth** stop on your journey is career exploration. You can explore a general list of occupations or search for a specific occupation and find links to resources that give you lots of information about the occupation(s) you choose.

The **fifth** stop on your journey is the reality check. You need to honestly evaluate your options. Do you really value physicians and have an interest in being a doctor, but have little skills in science? Does your occupation require an advanced degree, but your future commitments preclude graduate study? Do you have a strong interest in the arts, but your family is convinced you will become a CPA like your father? There are often ways to get around some of the obstacles during the reality check, but it is still important to face these obstacles and be realistic about whether you can get around them.

The **sixth** and final stop on your journey is the task of narrowing your choices and focusing on choosing a major. Based on all your research and self-assessment of the first five stops on your journey, you should now have a better idea of the careers/majors you are not interested in pursuing as well as a handful of potential careers/majors that do interest you.

There are also a number of books that you may find useful, including:

- [\*The Complete Idiot's Guide to Choosing a College Major\*](#), by Randall S. Hansen
- [\*College Majors Handbook with Real Career Paths and Payoffs: The Actual Jobs, Earnings, and Trends for Graduates of 60 College Majors\*](#), by Neeta P. Fogg, Paul Harrington, Thomas Harrington
- [\*The College Board Book of Majors\*](#) (College Board).
- [\*How to Choose a College Major\*](#), by Linda Landis Andrews (VGM Career Horizons).
- [\*Major in Success: Make College Easier, Beat the System, and Get a Very Cool Job\*](#), Patrick Combs