Picking a Major

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Colleges and universities have always had multiple and diverse purposes. In Europe and in the Middle East, for example, groups of scholars devoted their entire lives to the interpretation of religious texts, to understand God, to discern the proper relations between persons in society, and to transmit these ideas to the next generation of scholars. Early colleges in North America had the same mission—Harvard's purpose was "to advance Learning and perpetuate it to Posterity; dreading to leave an illiterate Ministry to the Churches." Yale's mission was only modestly more secular: the college would be a place "wherein Youth may be instructed in the Arts and Sciences [and] through the blessing of Almighty God may be fitted for Publick employment both in Church and Civil State." One prevailing idea was to provide for a "liberal arts" education, and both terms are significant: the word "liberal" derives from the Latin root, "liber," meaning "free" or "free person"; "art" or "artem" means "skill." To be truly free meant developing certain skills, particularly advanced reading and writing, and to acquire these by engaging the major works of the Western tradition, including the great Greek and Roman classics as well as the Hebrew and Christian liturgy. For the most part, this type of education was elitist: it was offered only to a few, the sons of wealthy free men, who typically constituted a small minority of the societies in which they lived.

By the late nineteenth century, higher education in the United States took a much more democratic turn with the passage of the Morrill Act of 1862. Senator Morrill of Vermont (which had no Ivy League college) proposed using public lands and money to create state colleges "for the Benefit of Agriculture and the Mechanic Arts," and "to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life." The key words were "liberal" and "practical": at the newly-constituted University of California, by 1900, one could take Latin, Greek, English, mathematics, history and natural history, but many students

took courses in agriculture, mining, military tactics, and engineering. The minister from Yale, Henry Durant, had emphasized the classics, but Pheobe Hearst, whose late husband was a pioneer in corporate mining, made sure that the new Hearst Memorial Mining Building was the grandest on campus. Durant suggested the patrician "blue" of Yale, the Hearsts had always been about "gold." Collectively, they would reach out both to the state's elite and to its "industrial classes," its landed families, and the farmers and the miners, the working men *and* women all aspiring to be free and vital to the success of California.

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The new undergraduates at the University are simply the most recent generation of young scholars who are now part of this tradition. UCSB has both the "liberal and practical arts." We offer a full range of majors that will prepare you for "the several pursuits and professions in life," but curiously, perhaps the most perplexing challenge is precisely this plethora of choices. And yet the structure of the College and of the majors offered is quite simple: in the Division of Humanities and Fine Arts, the Departments offer majors that explore different strains of human history, culture, and thought; they examine how diverse peoples at various times came to understand themselves, and how and why they considered some things morally or aesthetically desirable. In the Division of Mathematical, Life, and Physical Sciences, all of the majors are related to the scientific and technological revolutions of the past four centuries—what we "know" about the world comes not from what some ancient texts say, but what we ourselves can measure, test, and see through ever sophisticated instruments that enhance our very senses. In the Division of Social Sciences, the majors examine the messy construction of contemporary human societies—their forms of equality and inequality, their law, politics, and economy, and the methods through which these societies and their sub-groups (mis)communicate with one another.

Because all of these Divisions offer important insights about the world and about the human condition, a truly free and educated person should be versed in all of these areas. That is the basic rational for the General Education requirements here on campus, and even though these are "requirements" for a degree, they can be useful entry points to explore widely divergent fields. A smart freshman might start by exploring. Try things out and keep an open mind. Take a freshman seminar or maybe two, and figure out what appeals to you. And take your time.

Besides, it's a lot to ask of persons so young to have an idea of what they'd like to do for the rest of their lives. It's rather unfair, as most people that age have no idea what the world is like. I remember myself at eighteen: I thought I knew everything, but in fact the opposite was true. Indeed, I had no idea of how little I knew until I went to college. And I didn't pick a major so much as I picked the classes and professors that I enjoyed. By my second year, a number of those classes were in a particular Department, and so that was my major. Now, I'm from a Korean immigrant family, so I didn't know exactly how to tell my mother that I was majoring in Rhetoric. Being an eminently practical person, mom was hoping for engineering or biology.

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As a seamstress for many years of her life, my mother Soo Kim was among the "industrial classes" mentioned in the Morrill Act. But because of the civil war in Korea, she wasn't able to get a formal education, and so for most of her life, she was envious of people who'd gone to college and had the luxury of study. When it came down to it, she was happy enough that her kid was in college, and she didn't talk about changing majors. We talked instead about my favorite courses—"The Bible as Literature," "Poetry," "Argumentation," "The Rhetoric of Legal Philosophy"—and I could tell that she was maybe hoping for law school. My mother passed away before I finished my formal schooling, but thinking of her now, I'm so grateful that she let me do what I wanted. That was one of the nicest things she'd ever done for me. Many kids aren't that lucky.

College made me feel free. I lived at home, so there were chores and there were family bills (my brother covered the mortgage, I had the car payments) and other obligations, but academic life was truly liberating. It was like this: when I was a kid and I had a plate of food, I'd eat those things I didn't like so much first, then savor the yummy goodness slowly. My classes were the things I'd savor, the things I'd save because I enjoyed the reading and the writing, the puzzles of figuring out what was being said and written and the challenge of crafting a good sentence or an essay. I would do the chores, the job, whatever needed to be done, then quiet away with my reading and become lost in another world, in another time and place. It's very true: "there is no frigate like a book." Because my major was about texts and textual analyses, I grew accustomed to reading hundreds and thousands of pages and writing long term papers for most of my classes,

and I enjoyed every bit of it and I was sad when I had to graduate. I wasn't aware of it at the time, but I had acquired useful skills—reading carefully, thinking critically, and writing well. These would serve me throughout my life. They serve me still.

You should be free to choose what you love. That's what college can and should be about, that's what*life* should be about. Find your own yummy goodness. If you're slogging through your organic chemistry on your way to what you really want—say, nineteenth century American literature—then now is a good time to re-think your life. But then again, if you truly like organic chemistry and Melville only makes you seasick, then fasten to your molecules and enjoy your elements. Whatever it is, try to avoid slogging through a major, and for that matter, slogging through life.

Whether college becomes for you a path toward the "Arts" or the "Sciences," whether you yearn for "Truth," "Beauty," or "Justice," endeavor always to be honest with yourself and find the thing you love and love it passionately, fully, and yet also carefully. Be cautious in your choices: be aware that you might love something that doesn't quite love you back. Choosing a major that is not for you will soon seem like a trap, not something that will make you feel free. Indeed, one of the hardest things sometimes is to be honest with your own skills and talents—I really love playing football, for example, but alas, I will never be a running back in the NFL. I was too short and too slow. In the end, I suppose I became an academic because that better suited my native talents, and in that way, I'm like many of my colleagues. We became professors because we love what we do, because we chose prudently as well as for love, and not always because we would earn much gold. (As unfair as it may seem to many of us, lots of people in the NFL make much more money than we do.) Still, we professors are simply obsessed with our work, and we delight in finding others who are similarly consumed. To "advance Learning" on this campus, we work hard, although not really, because doing something you love and do well makes it feel so much less like work. Even through your own trials and errors, and maybe even through heartache, we hope you will learn that same basic lesson and that you will find your true love.

Welcome to the University: please do well in your studies, please learn and love what you do, and please be assured that you'll invariably acquire those skills that will make you a freer,

happier person and citizen, ready for whatever “pursuits and professions in life” that a good college education makes possible. Truly, how fortunate we are to be here.