



## Choosing a Major

By Elizabeth M. Economou

**Ever since the sixth grade,** University of Washington student Drew Goldsmith knew he wanted to be an entrepreneur. By age 12, he was already running his own dog-sitting service in Glencoe, the suburb north of Chicago where he grew up. When the time came to apply for college, Goldsmith was accepted—thanks to his high scores on standardized tests, stellar grades and well-rounded life experience—into the ultracompetitive

Freshman Direct program at the UW’s nationally ranked Foster School of Business. Now a senior, he is majoring in business administration with an emphasis in finance and—you guessed it—entrepreneurship.

While Goldsmith may have mapped out his college path, to some extent, before starting at the UW, he is the exception rather than the rule. Most colleges recommend that students declare a major by their junior year in order to graduate on time. However, students in their first or even second year of college often find the prospect of choosing a major intimidating. Here are some tips that can help guide students through the process.

### DON'T PANIC

While many students haven’t the slightest

idea what to major in when they first set foot on a college campus, that’s no reason to worry, says Randall S. Hansen, founder of the career-development Website Quintessential Careers. Hansen, a seasoned college educator and the author of *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Choosing a College Major*, likens deciding on an area of scholarly focus to a journey of self-exploration, with many unknown twists and turns along the way. He says his most important advice for students is not to panic, since there are many tools available to help them figure out what type of career they might want in the future and how to get there.

“Especially for younger students—those in high school or in the first or second year of college—there’s no need to rush into a decision about one’s major,” says Hansen.

### FOLLOW YOUR BLISS

Hansen encourages students to assess their strengths, their weaknesses and, perhaps most important, their personal interests. Taking a college’s required core courses allows students to explore a variety of disciplines, and they might discover a new interest.

“Think about what types of things excite you and what types of careers appeal to you,” says Hansen.

Tuning in to her interests while in school gave University of Oregon grad Sarah Helfgott a renewed excitement for her studies. As a sophomore, Helfgott, a psychology major at the time, found herself uninspired by the field she had chosen, and her studies suffered as a result. Seeking direction, she took an aptitude test, the results of which pointed her toward journalism.

“Once I changed my major from psychology to journalism, everything turned around for me,” says Helfgott. “I suddenly loved to learn, and my grades skyrocketed, as did my happiness with school.”

After graduation, Helfgott, a Portland native, used her journalism degree to pursue a career in public relations. In December, she finished a six-month internship in the PR department of Intel, and she says she enjoyed the detailed strategies involved in planning campaigns. “I’ve always loved writing—the technical part as much as the creative part.”

Marco Porras, a senior at Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington, changed his focus several times after realizing that studying electrical circuits wasn’t generating the kind of “buzz” he hoped for in a major. Porras, who is from Phoenix, Arizona, switched from electrical engineering to civil engineering and then to mechanical engineering, after learning about the curriculum.

“I was captivated by the number of opportunities that mechanical engineering offers,” says Porras, who is minoring in business and plans to pursue a career in project management.



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Goldsmith agrees that a strong interest in one's chosen area of study is key to success in school. "If you aren't interested in what you're studying, you're going to have a tough time applying yourself," he says. "Make sure you enjoy learning—otherwise, it is a waste of time and money."

### KNOW THYSELF

Knowing your values—which might include stability, job security and a desire to help others—is an essential part of choosing a major and a career. According to the UW Counseling Center's Website, "It's important to know beforehand what you value in your career and your life, so you don't find yourself in a situation where your values are compromised."

"Different kinds of people find different kinds of satisfaction through work," says Maurice Warner, associate director of the UW Counseling Center.

Katie Wielickiewicz, a junior at Seattle University, says her values, including a passion for public service, are in step with her double major of public affairs—with a focus on urban planning—and strategic communications. In the summer of 2008, the Wasilla, Alaska, native interned in Washington, D.C., for Ted Stevens, the late senator from Alaska.

"He taught me the importance of staying true to myself and to [my] ideals, but also how to create a compromise that can benefit everybody," she says. "[The internship] was hands down one of the best experiences of my life."

### SEEK OUT MENTORS

According to Hansen, talking with people—including classmates, professors, university alumni, and family and friends—can help make your path toward choosing a major a smooth one.

Helfgott agrees with the importance of reaching out to others. "I don't think it's fair to talk about my love of the major without giving credit to the U of O journalism school and the teachers who shaped my experience," she says.

### CONSIDER CAREER COUNSELING

Many colleges offer career counseling to



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provide guidance to students searching for a major. "Career counseling tries to help someone understand [their priorities] and discover the next right step," says UW's Warner.

A college's career-counseling services often include valuable assessment instruments, such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, which evaluates personality traits, and the Strong Interest Inventory, which measures someone's likes, dislikes and preferences across a broad spectrum of occupations, hobbies and leisure activities.

"The tests attempt to point out aspects of a person's approach to life that are likely to be important down the road," says Warner.

#### REMEMBER THAT LIFE IS ABOUT CHANGE

For college students and recent graduates, the future appears relatively upbeat. According to a survey by the National Association of Colleges and Employers, the number of new grads hired by companies is expected to rebound for the Class of 2011. The outlook is especially promising for those with degrees in business, engineering and computer science.

However, while a college degree can help open many doors, experts caution that committing to a major does not guarantee a lifelong career in a given field.

"Studies show that most people will change careers four or five times over the span of their lives," says Hansen. "No one major can prepare you for all of that." So don't worry too much about whether your major, once decided upon, is the "right" one, since people's interests and aptitudes frequently change over time, and we must adapt accordingly—often by returning to school or gaining real-world work experience in a new industry.

Goldsmith, for his part, has grand visions of the future. After taking six months off to travel abroad after graduation, he plans to use his entrepreneurial drive and business skills to find employment in a big city.

"It [majoring in business at the UW] has exceeded my expectations," he says. "The opportunities are endless." ▲

Elizabeth M. Economou writes from Seattle.



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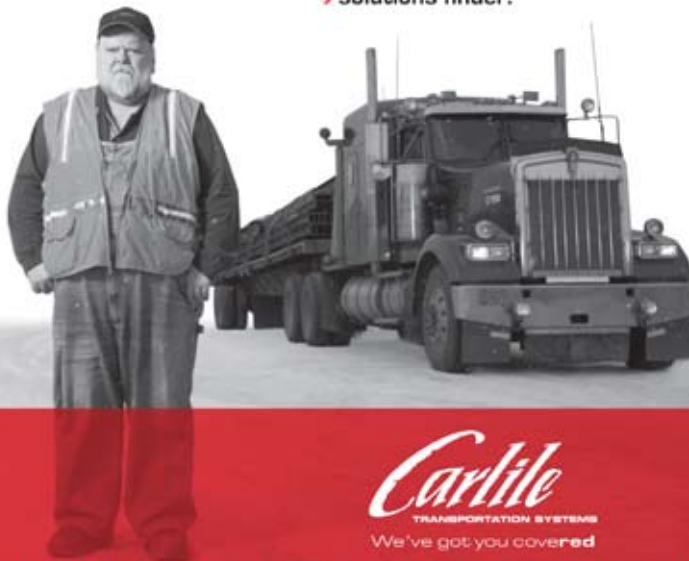


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