

Liberal Arts Majors: *Countering Some Myths*

Myth 1: *The sooner you decide on a major, the better.*

Fact: Many students begin college without a declared major and the percentage of those who change majors in college is quite high. In fact, in many cases, those who begin college without a declared major prove to have a distinct advantage. With the exception of a few majors, you have two years before you must make a decision about your major.

Myth 2: *People find a major they like eventually. If you just wait, it will come to you.*

Fact: Career planning is not passive. No one can do it for you and usually no one will make you do it. Each of you will benefit if you make use of the services available. Understanding the resources available to you can make your job (although still work) a reasonable and even enjoyable process.

Myth 3: *Someone else can make the decision for you.*

Fact: This is the time to start making your own decisions. All good decisions are made with the input of any people around us who can be helpful, but don't forget, you are the one who is going to live with it and you need to be the one to decide.

Myth 4: *Looking at what is happening in the job market is the best way to figure out what major to choose.*

Fact: "When choosing a major, look inside yourself as well as at the economic pattern," advises Dr. Ernest Boyer, President of the Carnegie Foundation. "If you are genuinely interested in computers, major in them. If you're happiest reading Beowulf, don't force yourself to study business. Think carefully before choosing a major. What excited and intrigues you? Knowing that may help you avoid changing majors several times."

Myth 5: *The major field of study predicts the career of the liberal arts graduate.*

Fact: While liberal arts students may seek and obtain employment that directly utilizes knowledge and skills growing out of their major field of study, they may also enter career areas which relate to their majors either indirectly or not at all. Within 3-5 years after graduation, more than 50% of all college graduates are in a career which is not directly related to their major. But the vast majority is still happy with the major they chose and feel that it helps them with the jobs they do now. They are also as happily employed as those who are in fields related to their major.

Myth 6: *Career planning is an irreversible process.*

Fact: You can respond to your changing needs and talents by shifting your career orientation. You continue to grow and develop through your experiences and this growth can generate new interests and options.

Myth 7: *A liberal arts graduate is nothing without a graduate or professional degree.*

Fact: Thousands of liberal arts graduates are currently employed in business, social service, government, publishing and elsewhere without having acquired advanced educational credentials. Many students do choose to pursue careers which require additional education-usually to their advantage. But, employers in general are looking for others qualities than your major. They want students who can think and communicate, have experience working with groups, and some exposure to the field they are entering either through an internship or summer work experience.

Myth 8: *Once you have selected a major, you don't need to decide anything else until you graduate and need to find a job.*

Fact: Choosing your major is just the first step in beginning to set a direction for your career life. You will remember that once you choose a major, you still have to figure out what you can do when you leave here. It is all a part of the process which you will be in the rest of your life.

- Myth 9:** *A liberal arts student has few talents which are valuable in the world of work.*
Fact: You have abilities that you have developed on an individual basis in order to respond to the life experiences of your first 20 years. These can be further defined through consultation with others, including Center for Career and Calling personnel. In addition, a liberal arts education can provide the opportunity for you to enhance your ability to understand and relate to others, to gain the flexibility needed to respond to a rapidly changing job market, etc. Identifying and representing one's strengths is frequently the critical dimension.
- Myth 10:** *There is one right job for me.*
Fact: There are probably job situations in which your abilities can be utilized and your needs met. People generally have only a limited awareness of the employment possibilities available for consideration.
- Myth 11:** *Every job requires a precise set of skills.*
Fact: Apart from highly technical or specialized jobs, most positions can be filled by individuals possessing differing combinations of abilities. There are worlds of options available to you. However, it is important to be realistic about what skills you need to enter a field you are interested in pursuing and plan your education accordingly.
- Myth 12:** *There is little opportunity for a liberal arts student to explore careers.*
Fact: Externships, internships, volunteer experience, and conversations with professionals in various career fields all provide contacts which can supplement written career information and classroom experiences.
- Myth 13:** *Most people start their careers at about age 21 and proceed in a straight line toward their ultimate career objectives.*
Fact: The career paths of most people contain zig-zags and changes of direction. Individuals generally do not achieve their ultimate career direction at 21 because subsequent work experiences may also provide them with knowledge and skills which can then be applied to other kinds of job involvements. (For example, news reporting and interviewing might be adapted to later work in social service, management consulting, or public relations.) People are sometimes unaware of this on-going career development process, i.e. the degree to which their needs change through experience and the ways in which aspects of past experiences are used. People make an average of 3 career changes and work 7-10 jobs during their lifetime in current jobs.
- Myth 14:** *The parts of peoples' jobs we see in person and in the media are accurate.*
Fact: Careers are usually distorted for the purpose of interest. Don't make easy assumptions about possible career options. Check with people in the field and at graduate schools now so that you do not make decisions based on false assumptions.
- Myth 15:** *There is a fixed set of job responsibilities for every occupation.*
Fact: Individuals in positions having the same title very often perform different tasks or perform similar tasks in very different styles. These job responsibilities may differ according to the varying capabilities of individuals in the positions.
- Myth 16:** *A college education does not always pay off in the long run.*
Fact: Even as you decide what major you want to pursue, it is important to remember that it is the total experience of college which will change your future. It is the minimum requirement for all professional level jobs now. But it will also change you. You will learn how to think, plan, and assess skills which serve you well in your life, not just your career.