

Don't Feel Locked In By Your Chosen Major

By DONALD ASHER

Do you think your major determines your career choices? Here's the biggest secret in career counseling: You can get any job with any major.

That doesn't mean that all majors prepare you for all jobs equally well. It means that at the juncture of college graduation, no job is inherently sealed off to you simply and solely because of your major.

It might not be easy to get a job in accounting if you've never taken a class in accounting, but it isn't out of the question. It's entirely possible if you want it.

Think about the marketing major who got a temp job with an accounting firm the summer before graduation. He was hired to help relocate an office, purely a muscle job, and he stayed on to help out with some accounting. He was surprised to find that he liked it. He didn't change his major, but he did stay in contact with the firm during his senior year, and upon his graduation the company hired him. He took night classes, and he's a certified public accountant today.

The point isn't to abandon your major or doubt the wisdom of your choice. But you must abandon the limitations you have put on yourself.

You can't explore career choices while you're accepting a pre-ordained conclusion. Most people receive abundant career advice from family, friends, neighbors, faculty and the media. Most of it won't hold up under scrutiny. Chance, inclination and hard work are far more important in the long run than your major.

Consider the psychology major who works as an engineer, the engineering major who sells real estate, the math major who works in a consulting firm, the religion major who teaches math in a private high school, the nursing major who writes for a newspaper, the education major who is a development officer for a nonprofit, and so on. In fact, after a few years, one's undergraduate major seems to have little to do with one's career direction.

For example, what would you guess these five college graduates have in common?

- Bank officer
- Stock market analyst
- Music therapist
- Director of senior citizens' center
- Field archaeologist

Answer: They were all French majors at the same college.

Let's look at what employers say they want in new hires. According to a survey of corporate recruiters by the National Association of Colleges and Employers, here are the top 10 characteristics sought in new hires in order of importance:

1. Communication skills
2. Honesty/integrity
3. Teamwork skills
4. Interpersonal skills
5. Motivation/initiative
6. Strong work ethic
7. Analytical skills
8. Flexibility/adaptability
9. Computer skills

10. Self-confidence

You'll notice that any student in any major could easily possess all 10 of these attributes. You also will notice that the only technical item, computer skills, is ranked ninth. The computer skills employers seek are just common office applications. The typical college student possesses most of them.

Some majors are obviously preparatory for a particular type of career, for example, elementary education. You can predict that a student with this major plans to start her career as an elementary-school teacher. In practice, however, careers change and evolve from the initial post-college job in ways that aren't predictable, even for those students who have a clear starting point.

By investigating real people with real careers, you will see how this works:

Ted Turner, self-made media tycoon, was a classics major.

Michael Jordan, the legendary basketball player, was a geography major.

Alan Greenspan, chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, was a music major.

Condoleezza Rice, U.S. National Security Adviser, was a political-science major.

Young MC, music mogul, was an economics major.

Lisa Kudrow, actress and star of "Friends," was a biology major.

Janet Reno, former U.S. Attorney General, was a chemistry major.

Scott Adams, creator of the Dilbert cartoon strip, was an economics major.

David Duchovny, actor and star of "The X Files," was an English major.

Carly Fiorina, chief executive of Hewlett-Packard Co., was a philosophy major.

Arnold Schwarzenegger, former Mr. Universe, film star and governor of California, was an economics major.

Jay Leno, king of late-night television, was another successful philosophy major.

George W. Bush, history major and U.S. president, once said: "To the C students, I say, 'You too can be president of the United States.' "

If your major doesn't determine the first job you should seek after college, what does? The following factors determine your career path after graduation.

Networking, informational interviewing and plain old-fashioned "talking to people." The more people you talk to about your career goals, the closer you will come to achieving them. When considering a career path, ask the next 10 people you meet: "Whom do you know who would know anything about _____?" You'll find contacts who can give you the inside scoop.

Internships, volunteer experience and summer jobs related to your career interests. If you can get some exposure to a career, the experience, however brief and fleeting, can be more important than your major. You can get an internship or volunteer experience, paid or unpaid, full or part time, any time of the year. Students often fail to take advantage of the

range of experiences available to them.

Papers and projects you do for class credit. Interested in something obscure and outside your major? Find a way to write a paper or do a field study on the topic, or some aspect of it. You'll learn about the profession while you gain valuable contacts.

Take a class or two, even after you graduate. Interested in urban planning, biotechnology or nonprofit administration? Even one or two classes related to these interests will give you an insider's edge, regardless of your major.

You can take action to identify a career that will excite you for years to come. Go ahead. All you have to lose are the preconceived -- and inaccurate -- restrictions you've placed on your career choice. Is there something less-than-obvious you'd really rather do? Go for it.

-- Donald Asher is a speaker and writer specializing in careers and higher education. This article has been excerpted from his most recent book: "How to Get Any Job with Any Major" (Ten Speed Press, 2004). He divides his time between San Francisco and Northern Nevada.