

From the Outside: A major decision
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By Rick Snee

The most interesting part of graduating is realizing how you've described yourself to others while in college. We have a wide range of identities beyond "student" to choose from while on The Inside: RA, SGA President, brother or sister, big or little, bartender or boozehound, athlete, etc. But one answer seems to trump all of the others: your major.

People ask you at any party, family get-together or while waiting in the Dean of Students' office for your hearing. (For the sake of this column, let's assume you're a scuba major.) From the simple answer of "I'm a scuba major," the questioner immediately begins to evaluate you. Are you like other scuba majors they've met in the past? Do you fit the stereotype of a scuba major? What kind of job are you looking for after college, as in will you teach scuba diving, or become a professional scuba diver? Suddenly, the burden of evidence is on you to prove whether or not you are the typical scuba major.

Even today, when people ask me what I did in college, I still answer, "I'm an English major." Not "was," but "am." And I'm always surprised when I say that because my major was my field of study, and—for all intents and purposes—I'm done studying, especially English. I mean, I'm a professional writer now, a practicing journeyman in the field of English-making. And of course there's that clichéd adage that you never stop learning, but my diploma (e.g., that scrap of parchment that *I still haven't received*) says that I shall no longer select "student" on questionnaires from Best Buy.

So what does this all mean? Your major is, in many ways, your identity even beyond scholastics. It applies just as much on The Outside as it did at RU—even if you end up not working in your field of study—because it's on your resume, it comes up in interviews and it's even used in competition with other college graduates.

Steve: You went to college, too? What was your major?

Dave: I'm a snorkeling major.

Steve: Oh, I'm a scuba major. I figured scuba would get me a better job than snorkeling. Good luck in your interview, snork.

Are you nervous yet? You should be; almost every graduate I know wished they could have changed majors at one point or another, especially Snorkeling Dave. And even me.

Part of the problem is that we didn't know who we were, yet, so it's tough to identify with a major. Ashleigh Cadieux ('07) described this in her letter.

"I started off as a criminal justice major, changed to teaching and ended up with a general liberal arts degree. As I am someone who has "always known what I wanted to do," I think it's fair to say that the likelihood of having one major and sticking with it from the beginning is slim to none. Once in the college environment, you start to realize how much there is out there, that you could do literally almost anything you want to in life."

Unfortunately, it's often too late to change majors, unless you want to spend a few extra years at RU. The best example of this was in a letter from Emily Krapf ('06).

"I was a psychology major, and half way during my sophomore year, I went to another office to see if I could switch my major. They said that I was already too far into my major and I should just stick it out. I got mostly Cs in my psych classes and realized something was wrong, but because the 'authority' said I should stay, I did. With psychology, you can't do much without grad school, but because I didn't get the greatest grades, I couldn't go to grad school. I then realized how much I liked marketing and picked up a minor [that] I loved. I should have just listened to my gut."

In a similar vein to Emily's story, Maggie Altizer ('06) also blames RU faculty, but for her three major changes. "I feel like RU did not offer enough recourses to help me clearly define what goals I wanted to attain during my time at RU."

Beyond time being against us, most desire to switch majors is based on "the grass is greener" idea: you're tired of doing scuba work all the time, so Carla's basket-weaving homework looks like a welcome change of pace. Such was my case.

While writing for Whim and *The Tartan*, I met a lot of media studies majors. They were actually majoring in what I did for fun. It didn't help that my predecessor, Bryan McBournie ('05) was already working in his intended field, journalism. But by the time I started writing for the paper, it was already my (first) senior year as an English major. I realized, though, that I wasn't writing journalistic pieces; I was writing jokes and opinion, which I can do in any forum. McBournie wrote news, reviews and his humor column, so journalism worked better for him. That, and I was almost done with English, so I needed to stick it out (for another senior year). Had I switched, I'd still be in school today or—more realistically—a dropout because I had run out of money.

Other alumni explained why they didn't switch majors, including Chris "Chugs" Taylor ('05).

"I never changed majors in college. I had heard the horror stories of doing so and decided to definitely not do so. [...] I never really learned anything new about myself, but I did become a lot more comfortable with who I am. Personally, I think that's the real question that college tends to solve: not so much what I want to be, but what makes me *me*" [emphasis mine].

From the stories I've heard, the best piece of advice I can give is: take your time. Use your freshman and sophomore years for gen ed credits, as opposed to leaping into a major right away. This approach is useful in two ways:

1) You'll get the hang of college by taking a bunch of 100 level courses. Although survey courses mean that there will be a large field of knowledge to cover, that also means that there's only time to cover the basics for each portion. So, unlike the later 300- and 400-level courses for your major, you can get by studying margin notes and bold type. And the best part is that you need these courses anyway for your gen ed requirements.

2) You'll figure out what field you are best at and/or enjoy the most. There's a reason why your gen ed requirements precede your major on your audit: you're supposed to take these first in order to find out what you want to major in. These requirements cover almost every field of study, so you will be exposed to every department of the school. This means excellent recommendations from faculty, most of whom will honestly tell you if you're cut out for the field or not.

Of course, it's tough to get into all your gen eds right away since you're low priority on class

registration as a freshman and sophomore. That's why it's crucial to maintain a solid working relationship with your advisor. Take it from me: I was horrible about scheduling appointments with my advisor and tried to do most of it on my own. That, Virginia, is where super seniors come from.

On a related note, it would be easier for freshmen and sophomores to take all their gen eds if the upperclassmen didn't wait until the last minute to finish their gen ed requirements. This trend can change if everyone starts doing it the right way. (And I'd also like to build a City Upon a Hill.)

Finally, get all the info you can about the majors you're interested in. The best Web site for this is Salary.com. You can find out how much you stand to make in any given field with your chosen RU degree in any location. After all, every single graduate based at least part of their initial success on money, so there's no reason not to know what you're getting yourself into.

If you still can't make a decision after all of that, remember: most graduates' education will be outdated in 10 years or less. And, somehow, most of us are still doing okay; you will, too.

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