Do Majors Really Matter?

By Selena Welz

More than a few college students have experienced the stress of selecting their all-important major. After all, isn’t what you focus on in school going to make—or break—you once you’ve graduated and entered the working world? This belief, which prevails across many undergraduate institutions, brings up the oft-voiced question: Does the major you choose need to have a direct connection with what you do after graduation? The answer is no.

Majors: Predetermining Your Life Path?
“People think that a major chooses a career, but that’s just not the case,” says Rosanne Lurie, a career counselor who has worked both at the University of California, Berkeley and the University of California, San Francisco. “Your interests and abilities lead to the decision of a major and a career after that, but there isn’t always a direct relation between the two. A major doesn’t predetermine what you end up doing.”

The fact of the matter is that most majors will qualify you for just about anything. The skills employers are looking for are developed and refined by the college experience in general, regardless of particular areas of study. According to an annual survey conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), communication skills ranked as the number-one qualifier on employers’ lists for the past five years. Honesty and integrity, teamwork, interpersonal skills, and motivation followed in rank, none of which directly relate to a specific major.

Even higher education degrees that lead to specific careers allow for plenty of flexibility. Engineering, medicine, and law careers all require specialized and specific knowledge, along with a degree to show for it. But even so, the degree does not dictate a lifelong career: An engineer could go on to an executive position at a technology company; a doctor could become a research physician; a lawyer could go into consulting or teaching.

Being Well-Rounded Is the Key
To get the most out of your degree, whatever it is, and increase your employment options when you graduate, it’s important to stay well rounded. For example, liberal arts students can really strengthen their resumes by including a few business or economics classes in their curriculum,
while business and economics students might think about participating in a few writing or public-speaking courses.

Along with rounding out your curriculum, college offers endless opportunities to gratify your interests and try your hand at different paths to see what really engages you. Student groups, special research projects, or volunteer activities are all great ways to get hands-on experience to enrich your resume and college experience. It’s also a great way to make friends with like-minded individuals.

**Experience Matters More**
One reason why people say it doesn’t really matter what you major in is because experience forms the bottom line of today’s hiring front. Employers care more about work experience than specific subjects studied in school. The NACE survey reports that internship programs are now ranked as the number-one source for finding entry-level employees—they were previously ranked seventh. Cooperative education programs moved from number 12 on the list a few years ago to the number two spot.

So use your summers and down time wisely, and think about how work experience you already have can complement and augment the skills you’re learning in school to build a strong resume.

**Majors: Part of the Big Picture**
Choosing a major is something that shouldn’t be taken lightly, but career planning goes beyond what you study in school. Deciding on a major is just the first step toward establishing a foundation that you will build on for the rest of your life.

“Whether or not a major is ‘practical’ depends on how you define practicality, and how you define success,” says Lurie. “If you’re doing something that you really like to do and are good at, whether or not it’s considered practical by conventional standards, then you have made a practical decision. Your choice of what to major in and your career choices after that should be a result of your own self-examination and self-awareness in terms of what you find fulfilling. With those criteria in mind, you’ll be making the right decisions.”

Selena Welz is a former editor at WetFeet.