

# Educational Planning and Decision Making

## 10

### Making Wise Choices About Your College Courses and College Major

#### ACTIVATE YOUR THINKING

#### Journal Entry

#### 10.1

Are you decided or undecided about a college major?

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If you are undecided, what subjects might be possibilities?

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If you are decided, what is your choice and why did you choose this major?

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How sure are you about that choice? (Circle one.)

- Absolutely sure
- Fairly sure
- Not too sure
- Likely to change

#### LEARNING GOAL

To develop strategies for exploring different academic fields and for choosing an educational path that will enable you to achieve your personal and occupational goals.

## ◆ To Be or Not to Be Decided About a College Major: What the Research Shows

Whether you have or have not decided on a major, here are some research findings related to student decisions about college majors that may be worth keeping in mind:

- Less than 10 percent of new college students feel they know a great deal about the field that they intend to major in.
- As students proceed through the first year of college, they grow more uncertain about the major they chose when they began college.
- More than two-thirds of new students change their mind about their major during the first year of college.
- Only one in three college seniors eventually major in the same field that they chose during their first year of college (Cuseo, 2005).

These findings point to the conclusion that the vast majority of students entering college are truly undecided about a college major. Most students do not make definite and final decisions about their major *before* starting their college experience; instead, they make these decisions *during* the college experience. Being uncertain about a major is nothing to be embarrassed about. The terms “undecided” and “undeclared” don’t mean that you have somehow failed or are lost. As a new student, you may be undecided for various good reasons. For instance, you may be undecided simply because you have interests in various subjects. This is a healthy form of indecision because it shows that you have a range of interests and a high level of motivation to learn about different subjects. You may also be undecided simply because you are a careful, reflective thinker whose decision-making style is to gather more information before making any long-term commitments.

As a first-year student, it’s only natural to be at least somewhat uncertain about your educational goals because you have not yet experienced the variety of subjects and academic programs that make up the college curriculum. You may encounter fields of study in college that you never knew existed. One purpose of general education is to help new students develop the critical thinking skills needed to make wise choices and well-informed decisions, such as their choice of college major. The liberal arts curriculum is also designed to introduce you to various academic subjects, and as you progress through this curriculum, you may discover subjects that captivate you and capture your interest. Some of these subjects may represent fields of study that you never experienced before, and all of them represent possible choices for a college major.

In addition to finding new fields of possible interest, as you gain experience with the college curriculum, you are likely to gain more self-knowledge about your academic strengths and weaknesses. This is important knowledge to take into consideration when choosing a major, because you want to select a field that builds on your academic abilities and talents.

Despite pressure you may be receiving from others to make an early decision, we encourage you not to make it an official and final commitment to a major until you gain more self-knowledge and more knowledge of your options. Even if you think you’re sure about your choice of major, before you make a commitment to it, take a course or two in the major to test it out and confirm whether or not your choice is compatible with your personal interests, talents, and values.

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“All who wander are not lost.”

—J. R. R. Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings*

### Student Perspective

“The best words of wisdom that I could give new freshmen [are] not to feel like you need to know what you want to major in right away. They should really use their first two years to explore all of the different classes available. They may find a hidden interest in something they never would have considered. I know this from personal experience.”

—Advice to new students from a college sophomore (Walsh, 2005)

### Pause for Reflection

If you have chosen a major or are considering a particular major, what or who led you to choose or consider this option?

## ◆ When Should You Reach a Firm Decision About a College Major?

It's OK to start off not knowing what your major will be and to give yourself some time and college experience before reaching a decision. You can take courses that will count toward your degree and stay on track for graduation, even if you haven't decided or declared your college major.

Similarly, if you've entered college with a major in mind, there's still time to change your mind without falling behind. If you realize that your first choice of a major wasn't a good choice, don't think that you're locked into your original plan and you're only options are to stick with it throughout college or drop out of college. Changing your original educational plans is not necessarily a bad thing. It may mean that you have discovered another field that's more interesting to you or that's more compatible with your personal interests and talents.

The only downside to changing your educational plan is that if you make that change late in your college experience it can result in more time to graduation (and more tuition) because you may need to complete additional courses for your newly chosen field. The key to preventing this scenario from happening later is to be proactive now by engaging in long-range educational planning.

### Student Perspective

"I see so many people switch [their] major like 4 or 5 times; they end up having to take loads of summer school just to catch up because they invest time and money in classes for a major that they end up not majoring in anyway."

—College sophomore (Walsh, 2005)



I've decided to change my major.

### Remember

As a rule, you should reach a fairly firm decision about your major during your second (sophomore) year in college. However, to reach a good decision within this time frame, the process of exploring and planning should begin now—during your first term in college.

“When you get to a fork in the road, take it.”

—Yogi Berra, Hall of Fame baseball player

## ◆ The Importance of Long-Range Educational Planning

College will allow you many choices about what courses to enroll in and what field to specialize in. By looking ahead and developing a tentative plan for your courses beyond the first term of college, you will position yourself to view your college experience as a full-length movie and get a sneak preview of the total picture. In contrast, scheduling your classes one term at a time just before each registration period (when everyone else is making a mad rush to get their advisor's signature for the following term's classes) forces you to view your academic experience as a series of short, separate snapshots that lack connection or direction.

Long-range educational planning also enables you to take a proactive approach to your future. Being proactive means you are taking early, preventative action that anticipates events before they sneak up on you, forcing you to react to events in your life without time to plan your best strategy. As the old saying goes, "If you fail to plan, you plan to fail." Through advanced planning, you can actively take charge of your academic future and make it happen *for* you, rather than waiting and passively letting it happen *to* you.

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*"When you have to make a choice and don't make it, that is in itself a choice."*

—William James, philosopher and one of the founders of American psychology

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*"Education is our passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to the people who prepare for it today."*

—Malcolm X, African American Muslim minister, public speaker, and human rights activist

### Remember

Any long-range plan you develop is not set in stone; it can change depending on changes in your academic interests and future plans. The purpose of long-range planning is not to lock you into a particular plan but to free you from shortsightedness, procrastination, or denial about choosing to control your future.

### Pause for Reflection

Consider the following statement: "Choosing a major is a life-changing decision because it will determine what you do for the rest of your life."

Would you agree or disagree with this statement?

Why?

## Factors to Consider When Choosing Your Major or Field of Study

Gaining self-awareness is the critical first step in making decisions about a college major, or any other important decision. You must know yourself before you can know what choice is best for you. While this may seem obvious, self-awareness and self-discovery are often overlooked aspects of the decision-making process. In particular, you need awareness of your

- Interests—what you like doing;
- Abilities—what you're good at doing; and
- Values—what you feel good about doing.

Furthermore, research indicates that students are more likely to continue in college and graduate when they choose majors that reflect their personal interests (Leuwerke et al., 2004).

## Multiple Intelligences: Identifying Personal Abilities and Talents

One element of the self that you should be aware of when choosing a major is your mental strengths, abilities, or talents. Intelligence was once considered to be one general trait that

### Pause for Reflection

In Chapter 3 (pp. 56-57), you answered self-awareness questions related to each of these three elements of "self." Review your answers to these questions. Do you notice anything about your entries that suggests there might be certain majors or field of study that match your interests, abilities, and values?

could be detected and measured by an intelligence quotient (IQ) test. Now, the singular word “intelligence” has been replaced by the plural word “intelligences” to reflect that humans can display intelligence or mental ability in many forms other than their paper-and-pencil performance on an IQ test.

Listed in **Box 10.1** are forms of intelligence identified by Howard Gardner (1983, 1993) from studies of gifted and talented individuals, experts in different lines of work, and various other sources. As you read through the types of intelligence, place a checkmark next to the type that you think represents your strongest ability or talent. (You can possess more than one type.) Keep your type or types of intelligence in mind when you’re choosing a college major. Ideally, you want to select a major that taps into and builds on your strongest skills or talents. Choosing a major that’s compatible with your abilities should enable you to master the concepts and skills required by your major more rapidly and deeply. Furthermore, if you follow your academic talents, you’re likely to succeed or excel in what you do, which will bolster your academic self-confidence and motivation.

### Student Perspective

“I try to do more to please myself, and making good grades and doing well in school helps my ego. It gives me confidence, and I like that feeling.”

—First-year college student  
(Franklin, 2002)

### Take Action!

#### Multiple Forms of Intelligence

- **Linguistic Intelligence.** Ability to communicate through words or language (e.g., verbal skills in the areas of speaking, writing, listening, or reading)
- **Logical–Mathematical Intelligence.** Ability to reason logically and succeed in tasks that involve mathematical problem solving (e.g., the skill for making logical arguments and following logical reasoning or the ability to think effectively with numbers and make quantitative calculations)
- **Spatial Intelligence.** Ability to visualize relationships among objects arranged in different spatial positions and ability to perceive or create visual images (e.g., forming mental images of three-dimensional objects; detecting detail in objects or drawings; artistic talent for drawing, painting, sculpting, and graphic design; or skills related to sense of direction and navigation)
- **Musical Intelligence.** Ability to appreciate or create rhythmical and melodic sounds (e.g., playing, writing, or arranging music)
- **Interpersonal (Social) Intelligence.** Ability to relate to others; to accurately identify others’ needs, feelings, or emotional states

of mind; and to effectively express emotions and feelings to others (e.g., interpersonal communication skills or the ability to accurately “read” the feelings of others or to meet their emotional needs)

- **Intrapersonal (Self) Intelligence.** Ability to self-reflect, become aware of, and understand ‘your own thoughts, feelings, and behavior (e.g., capacity for personal reflection, emotional self-awareness, and self-insight into personal strengths and weaknesses)
- **Bodily–Kinesthetic (Psychomotor) Intelligence.** Ability to use ‘your own body skillfully and to acquire knowledge through bodily sensations or movements (e.g., skill at tasks involving physical coordination, the ability to work well with hands, mechanical skills, talent for building models and assembling things, or skills related to technology)
- **Naturalist Intelligence.** Ability to carefully observe and appreciate features of the natural environment (e.g., keen awareness of nature or natural surroundings or the ability to understand causes or results of events occurring in the natural world)

Source: Gardner (1993).

## Learning Styles: Identifying Your Learning Preferences

Your learning style is another important personal characteristic you should be aware of when choosing your major. Learning styles refer to individual differences in learning preferences—that is, ways in which individuals prefer to perceive information (receive or take it in) and process information (deal with it after taking it in). Individuals may differ in terms of whether they prefer to take in information by reading about it, listening to it, seeing an image or diagram of it, or physically touching and manipulating it. Individuals may also vary in terms of whether they like to receive information in a structured and orderly format or in an unstructured form that allows them the freedom to explore, play with, and restructure it in their own way. Once information has been received, individuals may also differ in terms of how they prefer to process or deal with it mentally. Some might like to think about it on their own; others may prefer to discuss it with someone else, make an outline of it, or draw a picture of it.

### Pause for Reflection

Which type or types of intelligence listed in **Box 10.1** represent your strongest area or areas?

Which majors or fields of study do you think may be the best match for your natural talents?

### Personal Story

In my family, whenever there's something that needs to be assembled or set up (e.g., a ping-pong table or new electronic equipment), I've noticed that my wife, my son, and myself have different learning styles in terms of how we go about doing it. I like to read the manual's instructions carefully and completely before I even attempt to touch anything. My son prefers to look at the pictures or diagrams in the manual and uses them as models to find parts; then he begins to assemble those parts. My wife seems to prefer not to look at the manual. Instead, she likes to figure things out as she goes along by grabbing different parts from the box and trying to assemble those parts that look like they should fit together—piecing them together as if she were completing a jigsaw puzzle.

—Joe Cuseo

You can take specially designed tests to assess your particular learning style and how it compares with others. If you're interested in taking one, the Learning Center or Career Development Center are the two most likely sites on campus where you will be able to do so.

Probably the most frequently used learning styles test is the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI; Myers, 1976; Myers & McCaulley, 1985), which is based on the personality theory of psychologist Carl Jung. The test consists of four pairs of opposing traits and assesses how people vary on a scale (low to high) for each of these four sets of traits. The four sets of opposing traits are illustrated in **Figure 10.1**.

As you read the following four pairs of opposite traits, place a mark along the line where you think you fall with respect to each set of traits. For example, place a mark in the middle of the line if you think you are midway between these opposing traits, or place a mark at the far left or far right if you think you lean strongly toward the trait listed on either end.

### Pause for Reflection

After reviewing where you think you fall (middle, far left, or far right) for the opposing traits below, What majors or fields of study do you think are most compatible with your personality traits?

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <b>Extraversion</b><br>Prefer to focus on “outer” world of persons, actions, or objects            | <b>Introversion</b><br>Prefer to focus on “inner” world of thoughts and ideas         |
| <b>Sensing</b><br>Prefer interacting with the world directly through concrete, sensory experiences | <b>Intuition</b><br>Prefer dealing with symbolic meanings and imagining possibilities |
| <b>Thinking</b><br>Prefer to rely on logic and rational thinking when making decisions             | <b>Feeling</b><br>Prefer to rely on human needs and feelings when making decisions    |
| <b>Judging</b><br>Prefer to plan for and control events  | <b>Perceiving</b><br>Prefer flexibility and spontaneity                               |

**Figure 10.1** Traits and Learning Styles Measured by the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)

It’s been found that college students who score high on the introversion scale of the MBTI are less likely to become bored than extroverts while engaging mental tasks that involve repetition and little external stimulation (Vodanovich, Wallace, & Kass, 2005). Students who score differently on the MBTI also have different learning preferences when it comes to writing and the type of writing assignments (Jensen & Ti Tiberio, cited in Bean, 2001). See **Figure 10.2** for the details on the findings.

|   |   |  |
|---|---|--|
| <b>Extraversion</b><br>Prefer to discuss their writing in class                             | ↔ | <b>Introversion</b><br>Prefer not to discuss their writing with others               |
| <b>Sensing</b><br>Prefer very detailed instructions and guidelines                          | ↔ | <b>Intuition</b><br>Prefer open-ended assignments that allow creativity              |
| <b>Thinking</b><br>Prefer well-organized essays with logical analysis and rational thinking | ↔ | <b>Feeling</b><br>Prefer writing about their own experiences in a lively style       |
| <b>Judging</b><br>Prefer staying with the idea and get to the point                         | ↔ | <b>Perceiving</b><br>Prefer exploring different ideas and go in different directions |

**Figure 10.2** Students with Each MBTI Learning Style Have a Preferred Style of Writing

These results clearly indicate that students have different learning styles, which, in turn, influence the type of writing assignments they feel most comfortable performing. This may be important to keep in mind when choosing your major because different academic fields emphasize different styles of writing. Some fields place heavy emphasis on writing that is structured and tightly focused (e.g., science and business), while other fields encourage writing with personal style, flair, or creativity (e.g., English and art). How your writing style meshes with the style emphasized by an academic field may be an important factor to consider when making decisions about your college major.

Another popular learning styles test is the Learning Styles Inventory (Dunn, Dunn, & Price, 1990), which was originally developed by David Kolb, a professor of philosophy (Kolb, 1976, 1985). It is based on how individuals differ with respect to the following two elements of the learning process:

### How Information Is Perceived (Taken in)

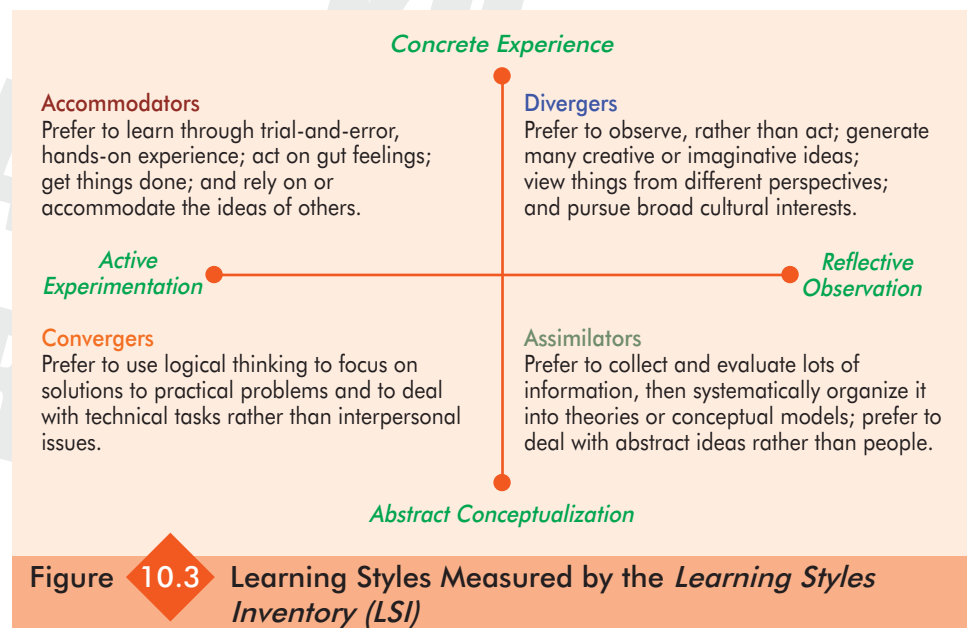
**Concrete Experience**  
Learning through direct involvement or personal experience

**Reflective Observation**  
Learning by watching or observing

### How Information Is Processed (Dealt with after it has been taken in)

**Abstract Conceptualization**  
Learning by thinking about things and drawing logical conclusions

**Active Experimentation**  
Learning by taking chances and trying things out



### Pause for Reflection

Which one of the four learning style appears to most closely match your learning style? (Check one of the following boxes.)

- Accommodator
- Diverger
- Converger
- Assimilator

What majors or fields of study do you think would be a good match for your learning style?

When these two dimensions are crisscrossed to form intersecting lines, four sectors (areas) are created, each of which represents a different learning style, as illustrated in **Figure 10.3**. As you look at the four areas (styles) in the figure, circle the style that you think reflects your most preferred way of learning.

Since students have different learning styles and academic fields emphasize different styles of learning, it's important to consider how your learning style meshes with the style of learning emphasized by the field you're considering as a major. If the match seems to be close or compatible, then the marriage between you and that major could be one that leads to a satisfying and successful learning experience.

We recommend taking a trip to the Learning Center or Career Development Center on your campus to take a learning styles test, or you could try the learning styles assessment that accompanies this text (see the inside of the front cover for details). Even if the test doesn't help you choose a major, it will at least help you become more aware of your particular learning style. This alone could contribute to your academic success, because studies show that when college students gain greater self-awareness of their learning styles they improve their academic performance (Claxton & Murrell, 1988).

## ◆ Strategies for Discovering a Major Compatible with Your Interests, Talents, and Values

If you're undecided about a major, there's no need to feel anxious or guilty. You're at an early stage in your college experience. Although you've decided to postpone your decision about a major, this doesn't mean you're a clueless procrastinator as long as you have a plan for exploring and narrowing down your options. Just be sure that you don't put all thoughts about your major on the back burner and simply drift along until you have no choice but to make a choice. Start exploring and developing a game plan now that will lead you to a wise decision about your major.

Similarly, if you've already chosen a major, this doesn't mean that you'll never have to give any more thought to that decision or that you can just shift into cruise control and motor along a mindless ride in the major you've selected. Instead, you should continue the exploration process by carefully testing your first choice, making sure it's a choice that is compatible with your abilities, interests, and values. In other words, take the approach that it's your *current* choice; whether it becomes your firm and *final* choice will depend on how well you perform, and how interested you are, in the first courses you take in the field.

To explore and identify majors that are compatible with your personal strengths and interests, use the following strategies.

### 1. Use past experience to help you choose a major.

Think about the subjects that you experienced during high school and your early time in college. As the old saying goes, "Nothing succeeds like success itself." If you have done well and continue to do well in a certain field of study, this may indicate that your natural abilities and learning style correspond well with the academic skills required by that particular field. This could translate into future success and satisfaction in the field if you decide to pursue it as a college major.



The engineering and humanities majors settle their differences in the fine arts quad!

### Pause for Reflection

In addition to taking formal tests to assess your learning style, you can gain awareness of your learning styles through some simple introspection or self-examination. Take a moment to complete the following sentences that are designed to stimulate personal reflection on your learning style:

I learn best if ...

I learn most from ...

I enjoy learning when ...

“

“Minds differ still more than faces.”

—Voltaire, eighteenth-century French author and philosopher

You can enter information about your academic performance with high school courses at a Web site ([www.mymajors.com](http://www.mymajors.com)), which will analyze it and provide you with college majors that may be a good match for you (based on your academic experiences in high school).

## **2. Use your elective courses to test your interests and abilities in subjects that you might consider as a major.**

As its name implies, “elective” courses are those that you elect or choose to take. In college, electives come in two forms: free electives and restricted electives. Free electives are courses that you may elect (choose) to enroll in; they count toward your college degree but are not required for general education or your major. Restricted electives are courses that you must take, but you choose them from a restricted list of possible courses that have been specified by your college as fulfilling a requirement in general education or your major. If you’re considering a subject as a possible major, you can take an introductory course in the subject and test your interest in it while simultaneously fulfilling a general education requirement needed for graduation. This strategy will allow you to use general education as the main highway for travel toward your final destination (a college degree) and give you the opportunity to explore potential majors along the way.

You can also use your free electives to select courses in fields that you are considering as possible majors. By using some of your free and restricted electives in this way, you can test your interest and ability in these fields; if you find one that is a good match, you may have found yourself a major.

Naturally, you don’t have to use all your electives for the purpose of exploring majors. As many as one-third your courses in college may be electives. This leaves you with a great deal of freedom to shape your college experience in a way that best meets your personal needs and future interests. For suggestions on how to make the best use of your free electives, see **Box 10.2**.

## **3. Be sure you know the courses that are required for the major you’re considering.**

In college, it’s expected that students may know the requirements for the major they’ve chosen. These requirements vary considerably from one major to another. Review your college catalog carefully to determine what courses are required for the major you’re considering. If you have trouble tracking down the requirements in your college catalog, don’t become frustrated. These catalogs are often written in a technical manner that can sometimes be hard to interpret. If you need help identifying and understanding the requirements for a major that you are considering, don’t be embarrassed about seeking assistance from a professional in your school’s Academic Advisement Center.

## **4. Keep in mind that college majors often require courses in fields outside of the major, which are designed to support the major.**

For instance, psychology majors are often required to take at least one course in biology, and business majors are often required to take calculus. If you are interested in majoring in particular subject area, be sure you are fully aware of such outside requirements and are comfortable with them.

## Take Action!

## Top 10 Suggestions for Making the Most of Your College Electives

At most colleges and universities, approximately one of every three or four courses will be a free elective—your choice of the many courses that are listed in your college catalog. Your elective courses give you academic freedom and personal control of your college coursework. You can exercise this freedom strategically by selecting electives in a way that enables you to make the most of your college experience and college degree. Listed below are 10 suggestions for making strategic use of your college electives. As you read them, identify two suggestions that would be of most interest or use to you.

### You can use your electives for the following purposes:

1. **Complete a minor or build an area of concentration.** Your electives can complement and strengthen your major or allow you to pursue a field of interest other than your major.
2. **Help you choose a career path.** Just as you can use electives to test your interest in a college major, you can use them to test your interest in a career. For instance, you could enroll in
  - career planning or career development courses; and
  - courses that involve internships or service learning experiences in a field that you're considering as a possible career (e.g., health, education, or business).
3. **Strengthen your skills in areas that may appeal to future employers.** For example, courses in foreign language, leadership development, and argumentation or debate develop skills that are attractive to future employers and may improve your employment prospects.
4. **Develop practical life skills that you can use now or in the near future.** You could take courses in managing personal finances, marriage and family, or child development to help you manage your money and your future family.
5. **Seek balance in your life and develop yourself as a whole person.** You can use your electives strategically to cover all key dimensions of self-development. For instance, you could

take courses that promote your emotional development (e.g., stress management), social development (e.g., interpersonal relationships), mental development (e.g., critical thinking), physical development (e.g., nutrition, self-defense), and spiritual development (e.g., world religions or death and dying).

10.2

### Remember

Choose courses that contribute not only to your major and career but also to your quality of life.

6. **Make connections across different academic disciplines (subject areas).** Courses designed specifically to integrate two or more academic disciplines are referred to as interdisciplinary courses. For example, psychobiology is an interdisciplinary course that combines or integrates the fields of psychology (focusing on the mind) and biology (focusing on the body) and thus helps you see how the mind influences the body, and vice versa. Making connections across subjects and seeing how they can be combined to create a more complete understanding of a subject or issue can be a stimulating mental experience. Furthermore, the presence of interdisciplinary courses on your college transcript may be attractive to future employers because responsibilities and issues in the work world are not neatly packaged into separate majors; they require the ability to combine skills acquired from different fields of study.
7. **Help you develop broader perspectives on life and the world in which we live.** You can take courses that progressively widen your perspectives. For example, you could select courses that provide you with a societal perspective (e.g., sociology), a national perspective (e.g., political science), an international perspective (e.g., cultural geography), and a global perspective (e.g., ecology). These broadening perspectives widen your scope of knowledge and deepen your understanding of the world.
8. **Appreciate different cultural viewpoints and improve your ability to communicate with people from diverse cultural backgrounds.** You could take courses related to differences across nations (international diversity), such

as international relations, and you could take courses related to ethnic and racial differences in America (domestic diversity).

**9. Stretch beyond your familiar or customary learning style to experience different ways of learning or develop new skills.** Your college curriculum is likely to include courses that were never previously available to you and that focus on skills you've never had the opportunity to test or develop. These courses can stretch your mind and allow you to explore new ideas and acquire new perspectives.

**10. Learn something about which you were always curious or simply wanted to know more about.** For instance, if you've always been curious about how members of the other sex think and feel, you could take a course on the psychology of men and women. Or if you've always been fascinated by movies and how they are made, you might elect to take a course in filmmaking or cinematography.



### Remember

Your elective course in college will give you the opportunity to shape and create an academic experience that is uniquely your own. Seize this opportunity, and exercise your freedom responsibly and reflectively. Don't make your elective choices randomly, or solely on the basis of scheduling convenience (e.g., choosing courses to create a schedule with no early morning or late afternoon classes). Instead, make strategic choices of courses that will contribute most to your educational, personal, and professional development.

Once you've accurately identified all courses required for the major you're considering, ask yourself the following two questions:

1. Do the course titles and descriptions appeal to my interests and values?
2. Do I have the abilities or skills needed to do well in these courses?

### 5. Look over an introductory textbook in the field you're considering as a major.

Find an introductory book in a major that you're considering, review its table of contents, and ask yourself whether the topics are compatible with your academic interests and talents. Also, read a few pages of the text to get some sense of the writing style used in the field and how comfortable you are with it. You should find introductory textbooks for all courses in your college bookstore, in the college library, or with a faculty member in that field.

### 6. Talk with students majoring in the field you are considering and ask them about their experiences.

Try to speak with several students in the field so that you get a balanced perspective that goes beyond the opinion of one individual. The following questions may be good ones to ask students in a major that you're considering:

- What first attracted you to this major?
- What would you say are the advantages and disadvantages of majoring in this field?
- Knowing what you know now, would you choose the same major again?

Also, ask students about the quality of teaching and advising in the department. Studies show that different departments within the same college or university can vary greatly in terms of the quality of teaching, as well as their educational philosophy and attitude toward students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

### 7. Sit in on some classes in the field you are considering as a major.

If the class you want to visit is large, you probably could just slip into the back row and listen. However, if the class is small, you should ask the instructor's permission. When visiting a class, focus on the content or ideas being covered in class rather than the instructor's personality or teaching style. (Keep in mind that you're trying to decide whether you will major in the subject, not in the teacher.)

### 8. Discuss the major you're considering with an academic advisor.

It's probably best to speak with an academic advisor who advises students in various majors rather than to someone who advises only students in their particular academic department or field. You want to be sure to discuss the major with an advisor who is neutral and will give you unbiased feedback about the pros and cons of majoring in that field.

### 9. Speak with faculty members in the department that you're considering as a major.

Consider asking the following questions:

- What academic skills or qualities are needed for a student to be successful in your field?
- What are the greatest challenges faced by students majoring in your field?
- What do students seem to like most and least about majoring in your field?
- What can students do with a major in your field after college graduation?
- What types of graduate programs or professional schools would a student in your major be well prepared to enter?

### 10. Visit your Career Development Center.

See whether information is available on college graduates who've majored in the field you're considering and what they've gone on to do with that major after graduation. This will give you an idea about the type of careers



Choosing courses that best enable you to achieve your long-term educational and personal goals should take precedence over creating a class schedule that leaves your Fridays free for three-day weekends.



Speaking with students majoring in the discipline you are considering is a good way to get a balanced perspective.

the major can lead to or what graduate and professional school programs students often enter after completing a major in the field that you're considering.

### **11. Surf the Web site of the professional organization associated with the field that you're considering as a major.**

For example, if you're thinking about becoming anthropology major, check out the Web site of the American Anthropological Association. The Web site of a professional organization often contains useful information for students who are considering that field as a major. For example, the Web site of the American Sociological Association identifies various careers that sociology majors are qualified to pursue after college graduation. To locate the professional Web site of the field that you might want to explore as a possible major, ask a faculty member in that field or complete a search on the Web by simply entering the name of the field followed by the word "association."

### **12. Be sure you know what academic standards must be met for you to be accepted for entry into a major.**

Because of their popularity, certain college majors may be impacted or oversubscribed, which means that more students are interested in majoring in these fields than there are openings for them. For instance, preprofessional majors that lead directly to a particular career are often the ones that often become oversubscribed (e.g., accounting, education, engineering, premed, nursing, or physical therapy). On some campuses, these majors are called restricted majors, meaning that departments control their enrollment by limiting the number of students they let into the major. For example, departments may restrict entry to their major by admitting only students who have achieved an overall GPA of 3.0 or higher in certain introductory courses required by the majors, or they may take all students who apply for the major, rank them by their GPA, and then count down until they have filled their maximum number of available spaces (Strommer, 1993).

### **13. Be sure you know whether the major you're considering is impacted or oversubscribed and whether it requires certain academic standards to be met before you can be admitted.**

As you complete courses and receive grades, check to see whether you are meeting these standards. If you find yourself failing to meet these standards, you may need to increase the amount of time and effort you devote to your studies and seek assistance from your campus Learning Center. If you're working at your maximum level of effort and are regularly using the learning assistance services available on your campus but are still not meeting the academic standards of your intended major, consult with an academic advisor to help you identify an alternative field that may be closely related to the restricted major you were hoping to enter.



#### **Pause for Reflection**

Do you think that the major you're considering is likely to be oversubscribed (i.e., there are more students wanting to major in the field than there are openings in the courses)?

## 14. Consider the possibility of a college minor in a field that complements your major.

A college minor usually requires about half the number of credits (units) required for a major. Most campuses allow you the option of completing a minor with your major. Check with your academic advisor or the course catalog if your school offers a minor that interests you, find out what courses are required to complete it.

If you have strong interests in two different fields, a minor will allow you to major in one of these fields while minoring in the other. Thus, you can pursue two fields that interest you without having to sacrifice one for the other. Furthermore, a minor can be completed at the same time as most college majors without delaying your time to graduation. (In contrast, a double major will typically lengthen your time to graduation because you must complete the separate requirements of two different majors.) You can also pursue a second field of study alongside your major without increasing your time to graduation by completing a cognate area—a specialization that requires fewer courses to complete than a minor (e.g., four to five courses instead of seven to eight courses). A concentration area may have even fewer requirements (only two to three courses).

Taking a cluster of courses in a field outside your major can be an effective way to strengthen your résumé and increase your employment prospects because it demonstrates your versatility and allows you to gain experience in areas that may be missing or underemphasized in your major.

## ◆ Summary and Conclusion

Here is a snapshot of the points that were made in this chapter:

Changing your educational goal is not necessarily a bad thing; it may represent your discovery of another field that's more interesting to you or that's more compatible with your personal interests and talents.

- You should be aware of two important elements when choosing your major: your form or forms of multiple intelligence (your mental strengths or talents) and your learning style (your preferred way of learning).
- Strategically select your courses in a way that contributes most to your educational, personal, and professional development. Choose your elective courses with one or more of the following purposes in mind:
  - Choose a major or confirm whether your first choice is a good one.
  - Acquire a minor or build a concentration that will complement your major.
  - Broaden your perspectives on the world around you.
  - Become a more balanced or complete person.
  - Handle the practical life tasks that face you now and in the future.
  - Strengthen your career development and employment prospects after graduation.

Higher education supplies you with a higher degree of freedom of choice and a greater opportunity to determine your own academic course of action. Employ it and enjoy it—use your freedom strategically to make the most of your college experience and college degree.

## Learning More Through the World Wide Web

### Internet-Based Resources for Further Information on Educational Planning and Decision Making

For additional information related to the ideas discussed in this chapter, we recommend the following Web sites:

*Identifying and Choosing College Majors:* [www.mymajors.com](http://www.mymajors.com)

[www.princetonreview.com/majors.aspx](http://www.princetonreview.com/majors.aspx)

*Careers for Liberal Arts Majors:* [www.eace.org/networks/liberalarts.html](http://www.eace.org/networks/liberalarts.html)

## Chapter 10 Exercises

### 10.1 Planning for a College Major

1. Go to your college catalog and use its index to locate pages containing information related to the major you have chosen or are considering. If you are undecided, select a field that you might consider as a possibility. To help you identify possible majors, you can use your catalog or go online and complete the short interview at the [www.mymajors.com](http://www.mymajors.com) Web site. (Your learning -style assessment results from Figure 10.1 may also help you identify possibilities.)

The point of this exercise is not to force you to commit to a major now but to familiarize you with the process of developing a plan, thereby putting you in a position to apply this knowledge when you reach a final decision about the major you intend to pursue. Even if you don't yet know what your final destination may be with respect to a college major, creating this educational plan will keep you moving in the right direction.

2. Once you've selected a major for this assignment, look at your college catalog and identify the courses that are required for the major you have selected. Use the form that follows to list the number and title of each course required by the major.

You'll find that you must take certain courses for the major; these are often called core requirements. For instance, at most colleges, all business majors must take microeconomics. You will likely discover that you can choose other required courses from a menu or list of options (e.g., "choose any three courses from the following list of six courses"). Such courses are often called restricted electives in the major. When you find restricted electives in the major you've selected, read the course descriptions and choose those courses from the list that appeal most to you. Simply list the numbers and titles of these courses on the planning form. (You don't need to write down all choices listed in the catalog.)

College catalogs can sometimes be tricky to navigate or interpret, so if you run into any difficulty, don't panic. Seek help from an academic advisor. Your campus may also have a degree audit program available, which allows you to track major requirements electronically. If so, take advantage of it.

## College Major Planning Form

Major Selected: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Core Requirements in the Major** (Courses in your major that you must take)

| Course # | Course Title | Course # | Course Title |
|----------|--------------|----------|--------------|
|          |              |          |              |
|          |              |          |              |
|          |              |          |              |
|          |              |          |              |
|          |              |          |              |

### **Restricted Electives in the Major** (Courses required for your major that you choose to take from a specified list)

| Course # | Course Title | Course # | Course Title |
|----------|--------------|----------|--------------|
|          |              |          |              |
|          |              |          |              |
|          |              |          |              |
|          |              |          |              |
|          |              |          |              |

### Self-Assessment Questions

1. Looking over the courses required for the major you've selected, would you still be interested in majoring in this field?
2. Were there courses required by the major that you were surprised to see or that you did not expect would be required?
3. Are there questions that you still have about this major?

## 10.2 Developing a Comprehensive Graduation Plan

A comprehensive, long-range graduation plan includes all three types of courses you need to complete a college degree:

1. General education requirements
2. Major requirements
3. Free electives

In Exercises 2.1 and 2.2 (pp. 48–49) you planned for your required general education courses and required courses in your major. The third set of courses you'll take in college that count toward your degree consists of courses called free electives—courses that are not required for general education or your major but that you freely choose from any of the courses listed in your college catalog. By combining your general education courses, major courses, and free-elective courses, you can create a comprehensive, long-range graduation plan.

- Use the Long-Range Graduation Planning form on pp. 232–233 to develop this complete educational plan. Use the slots to pencil in the general education courses you're planning to take to fulfill your general education requirements, your major requirements, and your free electives. (For ideas on choosing your free electives, see Box 10.2 on pp. 223–224.) Since this may be a tentative plan, it's probably best to use a pencil when completing it in case you need to make modifications to it.

### Notes

1. If you have not decided on a major, a good strategy might be to concentrate on taking liberal arts courses to fulfill your general education requirements during your first year of college. This will open more slots in your course schedule during your sophomore year. By that time, you may have a better idea of what you want to major in, and you can fill these open slots with courses required by your major. This may be a particularly effective strategy if you choose to major in a field that has many lower-division (first year and sophomore) requirements that must be completed before you can take upper-division (junior and senior) courses in the major. (These lower-division requirements are often referred to as premajor requirements.)
2. Keep in mind that the course number indicates the year in the college experience that the course is usually taken. Courses numbered in the 100s (or below) are typically taken in the first year of college, 200-numbered courses in the sophomore year, 300-numbered courses in the junior year, and 400-numbered courses in the senior year. Also, be sure to check whether the course you're planning to take has any prerequisites—courses that need to be completed before you can enroll in the course you're planning to take. For example, if you are planning to take a course in literature, it is likely that you cannot enroll in it until you have completed at least one prerequisite course in writing or English composition.
3. To complete a college degree in 4 years, you should complete about 30 credits each academic year.



### Remember

Unlike high school, summer school in college isn't something you do to make up for courses that were failed, or should have been taken during the "regular" school year (fall and spring terms). Instead, it's an additional term that you can use to make further progress toward your college degree and reduce the total time it takes to complete your degree. Adopt the attitude that summer term is a regular part of the college academic year, and make strategic use of it to keep you on a four-year timeline to graduation.

4. Check with an academic advisor to see whether your college has developed a projected plan of scheduled courses, which indicates the academic term when courses listed in the catalog are scheduled to be offered (e.g., fall, spring, or summer) for the next 2 to 3 years. If such a long-range plan of scheduled courses is

available, take advantage of it because it will enable you to develop a personal educational plan that includes not only what courses you will take, but also when you will take them. This can be an important advantage because some courses you may need for graduation will not be offered every term. We strongly encourage you to inquire about and acquire any long-range plan of scheduled courses that may be available, and use it when developing your long-range graduation plan.

5. Don't forget to include out-of-class learning experiences as part of your educational plan, such as volunteer service, internships, and study abroad. (For information on these learning experiences, see Chapter 11.)

Your long-range graduation plan is not something set in stone that can never be modified. Like clay, its shape can be molded and changed into a different form as you gain more experience with the college curriculum. Nevertheless, your creation of this initial plan will be useful because it will provide you with a blueprint to work from. Once you have created slots specifically for your general education requirements, your major courses, and your electives, you have accounted for all the categories of courses you will need to complete to graduate. Thus, if changes need to be made to your plan, they can be easily accommodated by simply substituting different courses into the slots you've already created for these three categories.



### Remember

The purpose of this long-range planning assignment is not to lock you into a rigid plan but to give you a telescope for viewing your educational future and a map for reaching your educational goals.

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## Graduation Planning Form

STUDENT:

ID NO:

MAJOR:

MINOR:

| TERM:        |       | TERM:        |       | TERM:        |       | TERM:        |       |
|--------------|-------|--------------|-------|--------------|-------|--------------|-------|
| Course       | Units | Course       | Units | Course       | Units | Course       | Units |
|              |       |              |       |              |       |              |       |
|              |       |              |       |              |       |              |       |
|              |       |              |       |              |       |              |       |
|              |       |              |       |              |       |              |       |
|              |       |              |       |              |       |              |       |
|              |       |              |       |              |       |              |       |
|              |       |              |       |              |       |              |       |
| <b>TOTAL</b> |       | <b>TOTAL</b> |       | <b>TOTAL</b> |       | <b>TOTAL</b> |       |

| TERM:        |       | TERM:        |       | TERM:        |       | TERM:        |       |
|--------------|-------|--------------|-------|--------------|-------|--------------|-------|
| Course       | Units | Course       | Units | Course       | Units | Course       | Units |
|              |       |              |       |              |       |              |       |
|              |       |              |       |              |       |              |       |
|              |       |              |       |              |       |              |       |
|              |       |              |       |              |       |              |       |
|              |       |              |       |              |       |              |       |
|              |       |              |       |              |       |              |       |
|              |       |              |       |              |       |              |       |
| <b>TOTAL</b> |       | <b>TOTAL</b> |       | <b>TOTAL</b> |       | <b>TOTAL</b> |       |

| TERM:        |       | TERM:        |       | TERM:        |       | TERM:        |       |
|--------------|-------|--------------|-------|--------------|-------|--------------|-------|
| Course       | Units | Course       | Units | Course       | Units | Course       | Units |
|              |       |              |       |              |       |              |       |
|              |       |              |       |              |       |              |       |
|              |       |              |       |              |       |              |       |
|              |       |              |       |              |       |              |       |
|              |       |              |       |              |       |              |       |
|              |       |              |       |              |       |              |       |
|              |       |              |       |              |       |              |       |
| <b>TOTAL</b> |       | <b>TOTAL</b> |       | <b>TOTAL</b> |       | <b>TOTAL</b> |       |

| TERM:  |       | TERM:  |       | TERM:  |       | TERM:  |       |
|--------|-------|--------|-------|--------|-------|--------|-------|
| Course | Units | Course | Units | Course | Units | Course | Units |
|        |       |        |       |        |       |        |       |
|        |       |        |       |        |       |        |       |
|        |       |        |       |        |       |        |       |
|        |       |        |       |        |       |        |       |
|        |       |        |       |        |       |        |       |
|        |       |        |       |        |       |        |       |
|        |       |        |       |        |       |        |       |
| TOTAL  |       | TOTAL  |       | TOTAL  |       | TOTAL  |       |

COCURRICULAR EXPERIENCES

SERVICE LEARNING AND INTERNSHIP EXPERIENCES

|                     |       |  |  |
|---------------------|-------|--|--|
| Advisor's Signature | Date: |  |  |
| Student's Signature | Date: |  |  |
| Notes:              |       |  |  |

Self-Assessment Questions

1. Do you think this was a useful assignment? Why or why not?
2. Do you see any way in which this assignment could be improved or strengthened?
3. Did completing this long-range graduation plan influence your educational plans in any way?

## Case Study

### Whose Choice Is It Anyway?

Ursula, a first-year student, was in tears when she showed up at the Career Center. She had just returned from a weekend visit home, where she informed her parents that she was planning to major in art or theater. When Ursula's father heard about her plans, he exploded and insisted that she major in something "practical," like business or accounting, so that she could earn a living after she graduates. Ursula replied that she had no interest in these majors, nor did she feel she had the skills needed to complete the level of math required by them, which included calculus. Her father shot back that he had no intention of "paying 4 years of college tuition for her to end up as an unemployed artist or actress!" He went on to say that if she wanted to major in art or theater she'd "have to figure out a way to pay for college herself."

### Reflection and Discussion Questions

1. What options (if any) do you think Ursula has now?
2. If Ursula were your friend, what would you recommend she do?
3. Do you see any way or ways in which Ursula might pursue a major that she's interested in and, at the same time, ease her father's worries that she will end up jobless after college graduation?