

***Think “Field of Study” Not “Academic Major”***

If you want to develop your relationship with the faculty and get the kind of education a college can give, you need to drop one of your preconceived myths: the myth of the academic major.

From freshman enrollment until graduation the big question put to you is, “What’s your major?” It’s one of the first questions you ask when you meet someone, and if you’re confused about what you’re doing in school or your life, you try to find the correct major so that all the pieces come together. When you go to career placement or the counseling centers, or any other advising office, you’re anxious to get answers to the questions: “What should I major in?” “Am I in the right major?” “I’m not happy with my major. Is there a better major for me?” When asked about what you want to do, the answers you give always seem to revolve around academic majors.

You end up in a scramble to fill in the boxes for departmental requirements, get to class, hand in required papers, and take tests. You see faculty as those who assign papers, give you tests, and sometimes bore you to tears. Occasionally you see them to ask questions about papers, upcoming tests, or to beg for mercy. This is a start, but it’s not the most effective way to work with faculty.

Being in a major, filling the college and departmental requirements, and getting a degree are not the same as getting an education. If you want to work with faculty members in a meaningful way, not just in the mundane tasks involved with the introductory courses they teach, you first must learn that the concept of academic major may have no real educational value.

Academic majors and departments are bureaucratic entities. They allow colleges to house and pay the faculty, and they provide academic compartments for students. They are needed to help organize areas of study and the vast numbers of students who wander through educational institutions. They tend to reflect a common academic thread that runs through a variety of fields of study.

Fields of study are not the same as academic majors. Although fields of study may be found within majors, they more closely reflect the work of the faculty within departments. To outline a field of study so that it has quality and coherence, you need to do a bit more than ask if the courses you are taking will fulfill the graduation requirement, if they will make you marketable, or if they will give you a back-up plan to implement if all else fails. You need to change the questions you’re asking and the context in which you’re asking them. After you have determined the critical questions, it is easy to determine how you want to answer them.

How does the determination of the correct questions connect to working with faculty? The processes by which faculty approach their areas of expertise may reflect a good model that you can use, in a less sophisticated way than the professor does in research, to build a coherent education. Even if you are concerned only with getting a job, you can utilize the faculty to build an appropriate field of study.

Those folks in front of your classes may not be merely generic political science, English, or communications professors. They are more likely to be professors of political economy and resource management, literary stylistics, and legal issues in communications. They are skilled at interdisciplinary study because to conduct effective studies they must consider the interrelatedness of the real world. They can give you a good sense of how to put together an area of study so that the course work makes sense.

Consider, for instance, that you are interested in international relations. Sure, you might end up in the political science department, and you’ll take some history and economics. However, if you take your program seriously, you realize that issues in international trade, East-West relations, or foreign policy cannot be studied without a foundation in ideological and religious bases for intercultural relations. Literature, art and culture, geography, and language fluency all play a critical part in developing a program sensitive to the complexities of the relations among cultures, nations, and nation-states.

As well, professors’ titles may obscure what they really study. For example, most psychology professors are not psychologists. The title “psychologist” is generally reserved for PhDs in clinical or counseling psychology who are licensed to practice. Some social psychologists study orga-

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nizational structures, integrating areas of sociology, business administration, labor relations, communications, and statistics. Brain function psychologists could just as well be working in physiology departments alongside biochemists, anatomists, and electrical engineers. Those who study attitude measurement and behavior prediction could work comfortably with political scientists, sociologists, and economists.

There may be any number of ways to approach study in your area of interest. The decision on which approach to take will depend on how you want to orchestrate your courses based on your interests and comfort zone. However, to build a field of study, you must think out what you want to know, what you want to ask, and how you are going to put the pieces together. In other words, you pursue an area of study in the same way that your professors do. You research the important issues, lay out the tools (courses) you need, and synthesize your solution into an undergraduate program.

The first step is to do away with the question of “What am I going to major in?” and replace it with the questions “What do I want to learn?” and “How do I want to go about it?” Once you have eliminated the question regarding majors, you are forced to think about your education rather than letting the college programs catalog define it for you. At this point, you can blend your interests with college offerings and you can sit with your faculty advisors and talk with them about their fields of study and the background they consider important. Concurrently, you can contact faculty in a variety of different departments who are involved with different aspects of your desired program of study.

You’ll eventually end up declaring a major and being in a department, but you can personalize your major by defining it through course combinations, independent study, research agreements, and extracurricular activities. It’ll be a field of study that is your own and works for you.