Declaring a Major


Some of you arrived knowing what you wanted your academic major to be and are still focused on that subject. Some arrived without a clue about your major. The majority of you are in between these two ends of the spectrum. No matter which of these describes you, you will need to declare a major during Spring Term. This year’s date is April 11th.

Carleton purposely delays the formal choosing of a major until your sixth term to provide you the opportunity to try a variety of courses, get to know faculty and students in the various departments, and to develop as a person. One faculty member told me he tells students that if they are not exploring the curriculum, “they are not taking advantage of what Carleton has to offer.”

Ideas to Consider

Selecting a major is a very important part of college as your major becomes one of the primary foundations for the direction of your life at this time. Students sometimes struggle with selecting a major because they think doing so commits them to this area of interest for life and they are not ready to say, “Yes, this is the career I choose to live for the rest of my life.” It is interesting to note that studies of college graduate career paths show that, on average, people change jobs seven times and careers three times. One thing this research shows us is that when declaring a major you don’t have to be overly concerned that you may not have the same interests in 20 years. What is important is to make the choice based on your current aptitudes, interests and dreams. Physics professor, Arjendu Pattanayak, stated it concisely when he said, “Students should major in something they care about; something for which they have a passion.” He also added that “it is important to think about your choices, but don’t obsess about them.”

As you consider various majors, spend time answering the question, “Who am I?” Reflect on and gain a deeper understanding of your interests, beliefs, and values. Centering yourself in this way will help you know yourself better and take control of your life. It can help you develop more autonomy. Understanding yourself is also an important step in developing a sense of purpose. A sense of purpose helps you to set your priorities and act upon them in a coherent manner. It gives you an inner compass that can guide you through the stressful times of your college life. As you strive to discover your sense of purpose, consider how your interests, values, and relationships fit with your vocational interests.

Practical Tips

Associate Dean Bruce Colwell offers these practical tips.

- Take at least 2 – 4 courses in the department in which you think you want to major.
- Have an in-depth conversation with your advisor
- Have an in-depth conversation with a Student Departmental Advisor
- If you still find yourself struggling to decide on a major, there is one other thing you can try. Get a college catalog and plan out on a term-by-term basis the courses you will take to earn your degree in each of the majors you are considering. Read about each course and rate your interest in the course content. Then compare your reactions to the courses in each possible major.
The “C” Word

Once you make your decision, make a commitment to really learn about the subject as well as the subject matter. Make your commitment so that you feel truly involved in the program and what it can do for you. Push away the doubts and try to really live the major. Do this, not to shut off other interests in your life, but rather, do it so you can understand how the major fits you and your dreams.

The type of dreams I am writing about are those that allow you to see your personal dignity affirmed and your self-worth enhanced. These types of dreams are positive and life affirming. Paying attention to them is important because these dreams can help you to both see and feel your future. As you think about your future, let your imagination stimulate your dreams and let hope stimulate your imagination.

Wonderings?

One of the better things about our term system is that the pace of life at Carleton moves quickly and, thus, Winter Term’s cold, snowy, and cloudy weather seems less noticeable to many of you. However, in talking with students over the years, some of you may be wondering about the values that you hold, the commitments you have made, the relationships you have kindled, or you may be starting to question the direction of your life. Some of you may feel it is a struggle to keep motivated. You ask yourself a lot of questions and don’t feel satisfied with the answers you generate.

If you do feel some of these kinds of things, here are a few suggestions from some students during a recent conversation over lunch.

- “Find an enjoyable place to walk and then do so regularly. As you do, let your mind wander freely.”
- “Get involved with IMs. It is a great change of pace.”
- “Go to the Rec. Center, that’s the way to relieve stress.”
- “Join Ebony, volunteer with ACT, find an org to join. Just do something you like that involves others.”
- “Take a half hour everyday just to think about your self and what you want to do… oh, yea, then do something with what you learn.”
- “I know this sounds silly, but just look in the mirror once a day and smile at yourself for a few seconds.”

In addition to those good ideas, I also offer the following suggestions.

- Find someone with whom you feel comfortable talking and then share your thoughts and feelings about your values, commitments (or lack thereof), and motivation. That person can be a friend, RA, hall director, advisor, a favorite professor or your class dean. Talking about your feelings is different from just thinking about them. Your brain processes your thoughts differently when it has to connect them and translate them into words that you actually say to someone else.
- Decide on one new thing to try. It doesn’t have to be anything major, but it should be a decision you make. This could be something like picking a new way to walk to class or choosing to join a new organization. The important thing is you are making a decision for yourself.
- Change the location of where you study. Take several short breaks when you study and don’t always do marathon study sessions. Study with a friend.

Important Dates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feb. 2-4</td>
<td>Mid-term Break</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 11</td>
<td>Declaration of Major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 16</td>
<td>Writing Portfolio due</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>