

When your College Student Changes Majors

Posted by: College Parents of America

It may come during a phone call. It may come through an e-mail. Or it may come during a visit home. Your college student lets you know that he is changing his major. Although some parents may quietly celebrate, for many other parents this is disconcerting, if not frightening, news. The most important thing to remember is – don't panic!

A change of majors may be a small step, or it may be a giant leap. Your student may have chosen her original major for many reasons – some better than others – and she may be changing for many reasons – some better than others. It also matters what the majors are and when the change is happening. Obviously, a change of direction in the first or second year of college is different than a shift during senior year.

It may help if parents understand that most college students, some studies suggest a figure as high as 80%, change their major at least once. The average may be as high as changing majors three times during the college years. It also helps to consider why students may choose their majors in the first place. According to a study conducted by NACE (National Association of Colleges and Employers), 66% of students choose their major based on a career in which they are interested, 12% say they "drifted" into a major, 9% say they were inspired by a particular teacher or professor, 7% chose a major based on earning potential, and 6% say they were influenced by friends and family. Clearly many choices are being made for reasons other than following the student's heart and mind.

Many college students enter college as "undecided" students. These students realize that they don't yet know what they want to do and they are keeping all of their options open. Other students declare a major at the outset of their college career because they feel that they should, because they hoped to influence the admissions process, or because it was all that they knew. Many students change majors because they encounter the reality of studying a particular major, they discover a new field, or they learn more about their abilities and interests. Still others change their major not through their own choice. They may be in a major with grade or testing standards that they fail to meet. Obviously, your student's reasons for changing majors will influence your conversations with your student.

As a college parent, what should you do when you learn that your college student is considering a major change? Here are a few suggestions of things to consider – and to help your college student consider if – or more likely when – the topic of changing majors arises.

- **Reminder #1 – Don't panic.** There may be very good reasons for your student to change majors. He will be in good company.
- **Reminder #2 – Talk to your student.** Good communication, including good listening, is usually the best way to begin to tackle an issue with your college student.
- **Staying in the wrong major can be deadly.** Your student will not be motivated and may not do well. Consider the alternative to making a change – your student may do poorly, leave school hating his major and his experiences, or leave school unprepared for the career he actually wants. As difficult as it may seem to change majors, if the decision is carefully weighed, it may be the wisest choice for your student – and he'll need your support.

- Before your student officially makes a change, remind her that many students may go through a period when they question their choices. Doubts are natural. These may arise because of a “sophomore slump”, an encounter with a particular professor, or some thinking about potential jobs. Encourage your student to think carefully about whether changing major is really warranted.
- Help your student to consider why she chose her major in the first place. Did her reasons make sense then? What has changed?
- Help your student consider carefully his experiences in his current major. Is he bored in his classes? Dreading his classes? Doing poorly? Constantly thinking about alternatives?
- Remind your student that choosing a major is not choosing a career. Many careers have many portals of entry. Help your student consider whether his current major might still lead to a different career than he originally considered. Help your student remember that most adults change careers several times during their working years. Your student’s major may lead to multiple paths.
- Help your student consider the realities of making a change of major on her timeline for graduation. Obviously, this is more important if the change is happening later in college. Some majors are also more easily changed than others. Remember that five years is becoming more the average time span for students completing college. Will a change of major add an additional semester or year? Will it require some summer school classes? Can he afford the extra time or classes? Might it make sense to consider graduate school instead? Consider all of the options.
- Are there other alternatives to changing interests? Could your student consider a double major? A minor in another area?
- Warn your student not to try to change his major on his own. Encourage him to talk to his academic advisor, career office, and faculty members in the new department. They may be able to help him prevent making costly mistakes.
- Continue to provide as much support for your student as you can. If she is considering a change of major, this may be a difficult time for her. She may be letting go of a dream. She may be unsure of her next step. She may also be excited to have discovered a new passion. Take your lead from her. Listen. Guide. And then step out of the way and let her take the reins.

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