

EDUCATION LIFE

Four Steps to Choosing Your Major

By NATHAN GEBHARD JULY 31, 2015

What will you be doing on this date 20 years from now? No, really. Try to answer that. Given what you know about your ever-changing self, and factoring in the breakneck pace of societal change, can you accurately predict what the future world around you will look like and what role you'll play in it?

Grave warnings from parents, advisers and the news media suggest that whatever major you choose will dictate where you end up. Suddenly, you're not just choosing a major, you're choosing your ultimate fate.

What I wish I'd known in college is that most people's work shape-shifts in unforeseeable ways. I've learned this not just from statistics, but from sitting down with thousands of people in candid conversations about work, life and what it takes to forge something that matters to you. It started after college when I realized I didn't have enough knowledge to decide what to do with my life.

Two friends were equally lost, so we started on a road trip of self-discovery, seeking out people who had found something they loved and asking them how they'd done it. That trip turned into Roadtrip Nation, a career exploration organization that produces, among other things, a curriculum for middle and high school students and a long-running public television series about finding meaningful work.

After 15 years of talking to everyone from C.E.O.s to camel ranchers, what we've learned is comforting: Most people are unsure when they're starting out. Where they end up isn't a direct result of their major; it's the result of a meandering process. Their major — whether they stuck with it or applied it in new ways — was the start of channeling their interests, values and skills into work that made the struggles and hard work it took to get there worth it. Here are steps to help you do the same.

1. Separate your goals from other people's goals for you.

How do you quiet the noise that's coming at you from family, friends and society? Parents suggesting you should be a lawyer, policy makers defining "success" in terms of paychecks, even the voice inside your head saying you're not smart enough.

For the Oscar-nominated director Richard Linklater, the noise said that the arts wouldn't lead anywhere. Friends and family — people he respected — told him to go to medical or law school. But Mr. Linklater suggests you consider where these people are coming from. "Do they really want you to be a doctor? Do they really want you to be a lawyer?" he wondered. "No, it just sounds good." Instead he realized: "I don't want to live like them, you know? I don't want their life. I remember just sitting there going, 'O.K., I'm going to reject the advice and do the complete, polar, 180-degree opposite of what everyone is telling me to do.'"

Dropping out of Sam Houston State University after sophomore year, he took a job on an oil rig. He used his savings to buy equipment and take film classes at a community college. The auteur of "Boyhood" indeed defied the expectations of people at home.

2. Forget passion; follow an interest.

Most advice about majors includes the admonition "Follow your passion." But passion is something you discover over time, by finding an interest,

however small, and nurturing it. There's no epiphany; it's a collection of small decisions that move you step by tiny step.

Adam Steltzner, an engineer with NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory, barely made it out of high school, dropped out of music school and was playing in rock bands as restlessness crept in. "I had actually started to notice that when I would return home from playing a show at night, the stars were in a different place in the sky. I was thinking, 'Whoa, they're moving. Why do they move?'" That moment would have passed by without changing anything in his life except that he went to sign up for an astronomy class at a community college and was told he had to take a physics prerequisite. This started him on the path to a degree in engineering mechanics, to getting his Ph.D., to landing the Curiosity rover on Mars.

He wasn't chasing engineering because it would get him a steady job. When he felt that little tug of curiosity, he followed it. "Surrender to the process," he advised, "rather than the goal."

3. Put your decisions in real-world context.

Whether you're attracted to something because of its promise of prosperity or because it stirs you on a deep level — neither inherently right or wrong — experts warn: Determine whether expectations match reality.

Veronica Belmont, a Web and TV host, producer and writer (Twitter followers: 1.75 million), advises this: "If you're really passionate about a topic, and you want to work in that field, you should already be doing it." Now more than ever, you can glimpse the inner workings of industries. Follow someone on Twitter to gain insight into a field, read industry publications to track trends, or watch free online lectures.

If your interest is piqued, go for full immersion with an internship. Ms. Belmont started out studying audio production at Emerson College in Boston and added new media studies as she became more interested in Internet

culture. An audio production internship at CNET clinched her interest in tech.

The important thing here, Ms. Belmont suggests, is not to master something but to test before you invest years of education and time.

4. Yes, you do have to be good at it. Be flexible.

Dips in the job market, failing at a venture you wanted to succeed in badly, or just realizing that something isn't as envisioned — these realities will force you to bend, contort or even redesign your ideal.

Jad Abumrad's carefully planned vision came undone when he realized he wasn't suited for the job he thought his major pointed toward. He had studied music composition and creative writing at Oberlin College and Conservatory, intending to score films. "That didn't really work out. I just wasn't very good at it. And so, at a certain point, I just gave it up. I thought my plan was wrong."

He was ready to start from scratch when his girlfriend reasoned that he didn't have to abandon what he'd worked toward. "She made the suggestion, 'You kind of like to write. You kind of like to make music. You're not really good at either on their own terms, but maybe you could somehow find the middle ground. Try out radio.'"

It wasn't a seamless transition — he began by working for free — but he stuck it out, creating a style of radio that fuses science and storytelling with music and sound. As a producer and host of WNYC's "Radiolab," his job is eerily close to what he originally imagined for himself, scoring films; he just had to stretch his thinking to get there.

It's that kind of flexible mentality that our interview subjects point to, time after time. A major isn't a lifelong sentence; it's a jumping-off point. You'll still stumble and have to recalibrate. But if you live life by connecting each successive dot, you open yourself up to possibilities you never could have planned.

Nathan Gebhard is co-founder of Roadtrip Nation and co-author of “Roadmap: The Get-It-Together Guide for Figuring Out What to Do With Your Life.”

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