

CHOOSING A MAJOR

Self-Help Material Developed by Advisors

In this article, the author describes how a collaborative effort among advisors produced some very useful self-help materials for students who are in the process of deciding on a major. The author states that the advising staff of the College of Arts and Sciences at The University of Pennsylvania offers its "Choosing a Major: Factors to Consider" checklist to NACADA members, who may adapt it for their own students. The advising staff invite recommendations for improving the material.

Three years ago, a committee of assistant deans for Advising in the College of Arts and Sciences, University of Pennsylvania, developed a workshop called "Choosing a Major," intended primarily for sophomores. We also developed self-help materials, both for students who attended the workshop and for other undecided students. We have continued to offer the workshop, several times a semester, with more and more sophomores attending.

One of the self-help materials, "Choosing a Major: Factors to Consider," has proven so useful to students that we now make it available, throughout the year, to students at any level who come for advising. We keep a stack of the materials on a display table in the reception area of the College Office, and assistant deans for Advising offer the materials to students who ask them questions about choosing a major.

The material consists of 1) *a checklist of factors that students may want to consider when choosing a major*, and 2) *a related list of campus resources*. I developed the material collaboratively in the following way: First, I composed a draft, basing the content on my many years' experience as an educator and advisor at the University of Pennsylvania. To make the material as readable as possible, I based the format on research about improving readability, in particular, the notions of segmentation and indentation, which are presented in "Typographical Cues that Facilitate Comprehension" (Lawrence T. Frase, et al., Abstracts from NIE Conference on Writing, June 1977), and the notion of white space, which is presented in *GUIDELINES FOR DOCUMENT DESIGNERS* (Washington, D.C.: American Institutes for Research, 1981, pp. 81-83).

Then I invited colleagues and students to recommend revisions of the materials: first, committee members, other assistant deans for Advising, the director of the University Counseling Service, and the director of Student Health Psychiatry; then, students in our first workshops and in advising conferences. Revisions were incorporated in successive drafts, until the advising staff thought the material was ready for duplication in large quantity. We continue to try to improve the material each year, before we reproduce it again.

"Choosing a Major . . ." is designed for independent use: the first three pages are for students to check as they consider the factors listed; the last two pages invite students to utilize the many resources on campus that can help them further consider the factors in choosing a major. One of these campus resources is the College Office itself: students must discuss their choice of major with one of the assistant deans for Advising, before declaring their major.

Our evaluation of "Choosing a Major: Factors to Consider" has been informal. When we distributed an evaluation form in the initial workshops on choosing a major, we included the self-help material on the list of items to be considered. In the two years since that time, we have welcomed comments from students who have obtained the material in the College Office. All of the responses have been favorable, about both the workshops and the self-help material. When all advising services in the College of Arts and Sciences are evaluated by an independent researcher, as they will be within the next year, we could have further basis for improving "Choosing a Major . . ."

Please send any comments or questions that you may have to Norma B. Kahn, the author of this article; or to Cornelia Seidel, the chairperson of the Committee on Workshops for Choosing a Major. Our address is **100 Logan Hall**, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA **19104**.

CHOOSING A MAJOR: FACTORS TO CONSIDER

Directions for using this checklist: 1) In the columns on the right, check the relative priority for you of various factors to consider in choosing a major (or minor); 2) add any other factors that are appropriate in your case; 3) in the margin on the left, **star ★** the factors that you see as problems or obstacles for you, in choosing your major (or minor).

PRIORITY FOR YOU

★ Star

High

Med.

Low

1. *Factors related to your personal interests and motivation*

- a. Interest or pleasure in the subject of the major:
 - 1) motivation to know more about the subject
 - 2) relationship of the subject to your personal values
- b. Likelihood of success/excellence in the area
 - 1) Self-confidence relative to your previous success in the area
 - 2) Motivation and/or ability to improve in the aspects difficult for you
 - 3) Desire to excel, not just to improve
 - 4) Other:
- c. Advice of "significant others"
 - 1) Advisor/counselor
 - 2) Friend
 - 3) Parent
 - 4) Other:
- d. Extracurricular interests (e.g., art)
 - 1) Wanting to apply this in your vocation, not reserve it for your avocation
 - 2) Other:
- e. Other personal factors
 - 1)
 - 2)

2. *Factors related to your financial, graduate school, or career needs*

- a. Financial
 - 1) Possibility that financial aid might be available for a five-year program or dual degree
 - 2) Immediate need/desire for well-paid employment
 - 3) Long-term need/desire for well-paid employment
 - 4) Other:
- b. Graduate school
 - 1) Plan to attend g.s. soon after B.A.
 - 2) Plan not to attend g.s. soon after B.A.
 - 3) Background appropriate for a particular graduate major or professional school
 - 4) Other:

		PRIORITY FOR YOU		
★ Star		High	Med.	Low
c. Career				
1) Direct relationship of your major /minor to your career plans				
2) Opportunities for previously unfamiliar careers that are beginning to interest you				
3) Belief that a liberal-arts education is desirable/useful for your total life plans, not only for your career				
4) Other:				
3. Factors related to the major/minor at Penn				
a. Availability of appropriate courses at Penn or at cooperating colleges nearby				
b. Requirements of the major/minor :				
1) Reading				
2) Writing papers and/or essay exams				
3) Math, statistics, or computer science				
4) Number of courses				
5) Specific courses				
6) Other:				
c. Difficulty of the subject for you				
d. Other factors related to the major at Penn (e.g., the fact that before now you've taken at least one course required for it)				
1)				
2)				

PLEASE NOTE:

1. **For campus resources** that can help you consider each of the factors above, see the attached list.
2. To **declare your major**, follow the procedures described on the handout available in the College Office.

RESOURCES AT PENN WHICH CAN HELP YOU CHOOSE A MAJOR

Please note: The University services below occasionally overlap, but you may benefit from hearing various viewpoints in response to your questions. In calling from outside the University, dial 898- instead of 8-, and 662- instead of 227- (the Hospital of the U of P.)

1. *Resources related to clarifying personal interests and motivation*

- a. Academic advisors
 - 1) Assistant deans in the College Office,
100 Logan Hall, 8-6341, and in student residences
 - 2) Advisors in various academic departments in CAS
 - 3) Advisors in other schools on campus: Call the Main
Office in each school or ask an assistant dean,
CAS, for referrals
- b. Career counselors
Career Planning and Placement Service
Suite 20, McNeil Building, 8-7531
- c. Personal counselors
 - 1) University Counseling Service
3611 Locust Walk, 8-7021 or 8-7022
 - 2) Psychiatry Department, Student Health
1 Maloney Bldg., 227-2860
- d. Academic **improvement/support** services (listed alphabetically)
 - 1) English Program for Foreign Students
21 Bennett Hall, 8-8681
 - 2) Penncap-Act 101
3537 Locust Walk, 8-8565
 - 3) Tutoring Center
3609 Locust Walk, 8-8598
 - 4) University **Reading/Study** Improvement Service
A-10 Education Building, 8-8434
 - 5) Writing Center
423 Bennett Hall, 8-8525 (or 8-7341)
- e. Related courses; in particular, Ed 345, Psychology of Personal Growth,
Graduate School of Education, 8-7361
- f. PENN Extension (Student Volunteer Center)
115 Houston Hall, 8-4831
- g. Printed resources available in the U of P Book Store, like Richard Bolles' "The Quick
Job-Hunting Map," (1979, about \$1.25), or "The New Quick Job-Hunting Map" (1985,
about \$2.95), which are designed to help you choose the work most appropriate and
enjoyable for you.

2. *Resources related to your financial, graduate study, or career needs*

- a. Financial Aid Office
411 Logan Hall, 8-7526
- b. Office of International Programs
133 Bennett Hall, 8-4661
- c. Career Planning and Placement Service
Suite 20, McNeil Building, 8-7531
- d. College Office
100 Logan Hall, 8-6341
- e. Advisors in the appropriate CAS academic departments
- f. Advisors in other schools on campus

3. *Resources related to the major at Penn*

- a. College Advising Office
100 Logan Hall, 8-6341
- b. Advisors in the various academic departments at Penn
- c. Advisors in cooperating colleges nearby:
Bryn Mawr College, Bryn Mawr, PA, 1-645-5000
Haverford College, Haverford, PA 1-896-1350
Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, PA 1-447-7000