

Majors and Minors in Higher Education

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about the purpose of majors and minors in higher education. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Focusing Your Studies

Some students come to college already knowing the kind of career they want to pursue when they graduate; other students come to college with little or no idea what will be next for them after earning their degree. Neither situation is better or worse than the other.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Perhaps you've always wanted to be a nurse, or a teacher, or an electrical engineer, and you're focused and determined to point your education in that direction—that's great!

For other students, higher education represents a range of possibilities and the opportunity to discover who they want to be professionally by exploring different fields of study. This is a perfectly acceptable approach to your education.

Recall the discussion of elective and required courses—higher education can be construed either as the specific path toward a chosen career or as a more general learning experience.

However, be aware that many schools will require you to select a focus of study, or “declare a major,” within a certain time frame—this is generally by the end of your sophomore year at a four-year college. So even those students who come to college with an open mind in terms of a major will need to balance a sense of exploration with a sense of focus.

2. Majors and Minors

A **major** is the specific field of study or subject area—like Psychology, Business, or History—that a student chooses to focus on. Each major has specific requirements in terms of which classes a student must take and complete to fulfill their course of study. So your choice of major is central in shaping your experience in higher education because it determines the kinds of classes you will spend a majority of your time in and the people, both classmates and instructors, you will spend a lot of your time with.

Your choice of major is not just important in terms of the experiences you have while you're at school, though. Because it identifies your area of specialization and expertise when you earn your degree, your major is a big part of your qualifications for opportunities after graduation.

IN CONTEXT

Some majors, such as Accounting or Nursing, prepare you for a specific career—your coursework and degree in these areas are essentially your first steps toward becoming an accountant or a nurse.

Other majors, like Philosophy or English, don't really have an associated profession (you might call yourself a philosopher, but the only ways to be paid money for doing philosophy are to teach, write books, or give lectures), but employers may value the skills—critical thinking, writing, and creativity, for example—that those majors help students develop.

Most college students will have to choose and “declare” a major in order to earn their degrees. Choosing a minor, on the other hand, is usually optional.

A **minor** is an additional, secondary area of specialization. If you're not required to have a minor, why would you decide to pursue one?

In general, there are two reasons a student would seek a minor:

- You might want to have a specialization in a more specific area that is directly related to your major, such as a major in Business with a minor in Marketing. This combination can look impressive on a résumé because it suggests an understanding of the broader field and some experience with a focus or specialization that more directly translates to the working world.
- A student might choose a minor because they are interested in two very different fields—for example, Mathematics and Theater. While your theater experience is not likely to directly contribute to your work in mathematics, these less likely combinations can also be impressive on a résumé for a different reason—they imply that you are a multi-dimensional person with a diverse set of interests.



TERMS TO KNOW

Major

The area of study that you declare as the primary focus of your studies while you are in school, and it's the subject that you will take the most courses in. Typically, your major is displayed on your diploma or certificate when you graduate. Some ambitious students graduate with more than one major.

Minor

The area of study that you declare as the secondary focus of your studies while you are in school, and it will require you to take several related courses. At most schools, minors are optional. It's possible to declare multiple minors.



SUMMARY

Many schools require you to declare a **major**, which is the main subject area you choose as the central **focus of your studies** for your degree. Your academic focus may also extend to a **minor**, which is a secondary area of study to compliment or contrast with your major.

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