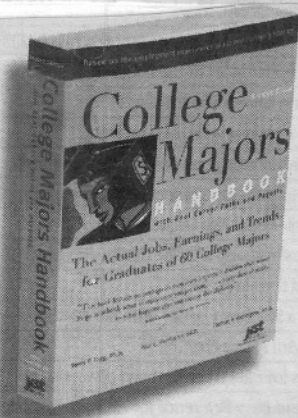


The 'major' dilemma



To those parents obsessed with where their high school-age son or daughter will go to college, a trio of Northeastern University professors suggests a redirection of energy. In *College Majors Handbook* (JIST Works, \$24.95), released this summer, authors Paul Harrington, Neeta Fogg and Thomas Harrington argue that the most important decision a college student will make is the choice of a major field of study. USA TODAY reporter **Mary Beth Marklein** talks with co-author Paul Harrington, a professor of economics:

USA TODAY · THURSDAY, AUGUST 5, 2004 · 5D

Q: What's your main message?

A: We've gone into this frenzy. For kids in the middle and upper-middle class, there's almost a rat race to get into the best college. But the labor market is very good at finding smart, able people. The book says, "Don't despair if your kid doesn't go to Harvard." We also say too many students opt into major fields of study by default, without giving much consideration to their choice, at least with respect to the kinds of career options this choice will both create and eliminate. If you don't take the right set of courses in high school, it really cuts you out of certain occupations.

Q: But aren't you just imposing another pressure on students if you rush them into choosing a major? Isn't college a time to explore?

A: This is the hard part. When I was a kid, we didn't think about any of this stuff at all. But the world's a less forgiving place today. That doesn't mean you have to make a decision at age 14. You don't need to know you're going to be a journalist or an engineer, though you're going to be advantaged if you do know this. But you need to know what your strengths are. To go to college to say I'm going to find myself? Bad idea. You should go to college with a kind of a focus. A kid who goes in and says 'I'm going to be an accounting major,' that's a plan.

Q: What if she discovers she can't stand accounting? Can she change direction?

A: Absolutely, but the point is, the earlier you figure out where you're headed in a general way, the more you are advantaged.

Q: Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan recently testified that the United States faces "a major problem of matching skills of workers to the technological base of the economy." And the book devotes several pages to the earnings potential of people who major in various fields. What role should those factors play in determining a major?

A: You have to know not only what the labor market says but who you are as a person, your aptitude and abilities. The worst thing is to get into an area because you think you can make a lot of money and then not like it.

Q: So where does a liberal arts education fit into all this?

A: The real question is how the labor market sees different degrees. The labor market has greater rewards for students with specific occupational

The earnings factor

Here's a sampling of annual earnings of full-time employed college graduates with only a bachelor's degree, by major field of study:

Field of study	Mean annual earnings
Chemical engineering	\$75,579
Physics/astronomy	\$69,612
Accounting	\$63,486
Marketing	\$57,290
Political science	\$56,971
Legal studies/pre-law	\$54,234
History	\$51,483
Nursing	\$50,936
Psychology	\$49,964
Microbiology/biochemistry	\$49,524
English	\$48,890
Foreign language/literature	\$46,502
Secondary school teacher	\$44,813
Philosophy	\$42,865
Dramatic arts	\$41,580
Social work	\$37,836

Source: National Science Foundation, 1993 National Survey of College Graduates, updated by *College Majors Handbook* to 2000 Census data

Another view: Any field will do

Not everyone agrees that students need to know what they want to major in by the time they get to college.

"The most important thing for a student to find out in college is what really turns them on," says Donald Asher, author of the just-released book *How to Get Any Job With Any Major* (Ten Speed Press, \$14.95). "If they pay attention to what they like, success will follow."

That doesn't mean every major will prepare a student for any career, he cautions. But "at the juncture of college graduation, no job is inherently sealed off to you simply and solely because of your major."

Asher notes that most people end up in jobs that are "fairly unrelated" to what they studied in college. He estimates, based on his observations, that the average person will switch careers three to five times. And sometimes in seemingly dramatic fashion.

Consider, for example, the path taken by Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan, who last month raised concerns in Congress that the United States isn't producing workers with skill levels "to match the required increases of increasing technology."

He earned college degrees in economics. But immediately after high school, he studied at the Juilliard School of Music in New York and played clarinet and saxophone in a traveling swing band.

By Mary Beth Marklein