The Major Question

Mia Hagerty
In a school with more than 60 undergraduate majors, the typical University of Richmond student is bound to feel overwhelmed by the declaration of a major. This is no surprise—Richmond boasts three outstanding undergraduate schools from which to choose, along with many possible ways to major and minor in a combination of fields. Add in the pressure of choosing a degree that will be valuable in the working world—displaying both knowledge and ability—and students may be prone to throw their hands up in frustration. Because the question on nearly every underclassman's mind—"What do I major in?"—is so popular, Forum Magazine decided to investigate the issue further.
The Schools: Three are Better than One

Many community members have observed a rigid divide between the three undergraduate schools at the university. President Ayers even regarded the integration of the five schools as one of the commitments of the Richmond Promise that had yet to be fully realized in a meeting earlier this year with representatives of Westhampton College Government Association (WCGA) and Richmond College Student Government Association (RCSGA).

The School of Arts and Sciences (A&S) boasts the highest number of students, which has stayed relatively constant since 2002. The Jepson School of Leadership Studies has, however, experienced an increase in the number of students since 2002 and continues this upward trend. Though we may not initially take note of the fact that the Robins School of Business and the Jepson School of Leadership are dominated by women or by men, a clear gender preference exists within the two schools. Females make up 60 percent of the Leadership School majors while males make up 64 percent of the students pursuing a Business School major.

Since many students feel strongly about the major they have chosen to pursue, it seems obvious that they would show a primary allegiance to the school they are affiliated with. Some students immediately connected with their field of study and knew exactly how they wanted to utilize their education.

"After a tragic experience with blindness, I became fascinated with the field of medicine, specifically ophthalmology," said senior Kenton Meronard. Some students, however, believe that certain values lie with one particular discipline. "I think a math major teaches you how to critically think and address problems that you may have originally thought were impossible," senior Jake Earle said. "These are skills that you cannot pick up in a job and are transferable to any career you choose."

However, some students curious enough to step outside of their curricular bubble find they can access even more of the university's amazing resources. Senior Paige Schaefer decided to switch out the business track to an art history degree with a concentration in arts management, which allows students to take classes in the Business School. "Without my art history major, I would not know about the politics in 16th century Rome, Hinduism in South India, or Japanese tea ceremonies," Schaefer reflected. "My arts management concentration allows me to combine the knowledge and skills I've learned in my art history courses to a business setting, and the courses I've taken within my concentration have directly applied to internships I've held."

In order to break down the barriers between the schools, faculty and administrators should continue to create interscholastic programs of study such as arts management. While students often affiliate themselves with a particular school, the resourceful student will draw upon all three to create a personally relevant course of study.

The Major Distribution

Over the past six years, the top 10 most popular undergraduate majors have barely changed. Most notably, business administration has been the most popular major at the university, with accounting and international studies consistently among the top five each year. Despite the broad-sweeping notion that the job market favors degrees in science and math, many University of Richmond students are displaying their ability to think critically by declaring humanities majors in history and English. In fact, only two science majors are in the top ten: biology and psychology.

The most popular major, business administration, has actually increased in the number of students pursuing it despite the fact that the number of students in the Robins School has decreased over the past eleven years. This implies that though students are beginning to favor A&S or the Jepson School, the students in the Robins School are congregating to the
business administration major. This may be attributable to how, within the business administration major, students may choose from five varied concentrations.

At the University of Richmond, there is a strong sense that in order for a student to display their wide range of ability, they must major or minor in at least one other field. There are currently more than 1 in 5 students taking on a double major at Richmond, with the most popular combination being a business administration degree with a second major in leadership Studies.

However, this mindset may not necessarily benefit every student. “Often a student has genuine interest in several courses in a second or third major, but not in other courses in such majors, and ends up taking courses that aren’t of interest simply to get another major. What for?” posed former Dean of Arts and Sciences David Leary. “He or she would probably be better off majoring in a single field and taking a wider range of other courses, ideally revolving around some central topics of interest, rather than limiting himself or herself to a more restricted range of subjects.”

The Value of a Liberal Arts Education

While students enjoy their experience at the university, many are concerned with the value of their degree. This concern comes with good reason; the average college student graduates with $29,400 in debt, while the total student loan debt has surpassed credit card debt in the U.S. at over a trillion dollars. Students are flocking to the business school with good reason: The business-related industry sector, along with information services jobs, will experience one of the highest growths in hiring college graduates this year as compared to other industries. A smaller group of students is choosing to pursue a definite lucrative path: According to the U.S. Department of Labor Statistics, the top 10 highest paying occupations are specialized doctors. The 11th highest paying occupation is a chief executive.

However, do students truly need to worry exclusively on the title of their degree? Analysts at the New York Federal Reserve Bank have revealed that a whopping 72.7 percent of college graduates work in a job that does not require having a college degree related to their major. This means that regardless of major, a successfully earned college degree in any field may be the ticket to dozens of seemingly unrelated professions.

According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers, employers rate the ability to work in a team, to make decisions and solve problems, to organize and plan, and to communicate effectively as the most valuable skills of a potential employee. This skill set can be obtained through every major at the university, regardless of the major it is branded through. The Office of Alumni and Career Services agrees: “I believe UR students of any major are well-prepared for the workplace,” said Leslie Stevenson, director of Career Services. In the end, students will benefit in the long-term from choosing a subject that genuinely interests them.

The Bottom Line

At Richmond we are fortunate to have a plethora of academic paths to pursue. Ultimately, the value of a University of Richmond degree lies in the liberal arts education, which prepares students for the world of work by providing them with an invaluable set of skills. In the end, the surest way to know that you have chosen the right path of study is to ask yourself why you picked it and be able to tell others the same.

“He or she would probably be better off majoring in a single field and taking a wider range of other courses...rather than limiting himself or herself to a more restricted range of subjects.”

–David Leary