Does Major = Career?

Some students enter college with a major already chosen and a clear career direction in mind. Many students however, begin college without any clue as to what their future career direction might be, and more importantly, what major to select. Choosing a college major can be a very stressful process for students. Similarly, parents and family members often feel frustrated if their family member is indecisive or hasn’t chosen a career direction. The following are some common misconceptions and corresponding truths that might help to alleviate student, parent and family concerns surrounding the issue:

**MYTH:** Once students choose a major they are permanently “locked” into a narrow career path and it’s tough to switch.

**REALITY:** Many workers in the US are currently in a career field that is not directly related to their major

**MYTH:** There is only one right major or career out there.

**REALITY:** Many college graduates today will change their major at least once and can ultimately have around 3-5 different careers in their work life

**MYTH:** Choosing the wrong career = failure.

**REALITY:** There is no such thing as ‘choosing the wrong major or career’. There is such a thing as choosing a major or career that might not be a great “fit” for an individual based upon who they are and in what they are interested. It happens all the time. Rather than panicking when this occurs, students can, instead, use this situation as a learning and growth opportunity. By encountering an academic area of study or career path that is not a good fit, students can clarify their values, interests and personality and become exposed to new academic and career areas of interest.

**MYTH:** Only applied majors like engineering & accounting will give students the skills they need to succeed in the job market.

**REALITY:** No matter which major they choose, students can develop a well-rounded skill set and will have many career options after receiving a bachelor’s degree. Liberal arts majors in a particular allow students to sharpen important transferable skills like communication and teamwork. In the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) Job Outlook 2010 report, employers cited communication skills to be the top skill they seek in potential employees.

Parents and family members can also take an active role in helping to alleviate some stress for their student by focusing on the following:

- Do not put a lot of pressure on your student to make an immediate decision about a possible major or career. If he or she feels “stuck” in the decision-making process, encourage them to visit the Career Center and make an appointment to talk with a Career Consultant.

- Encourage your student to pursue an academic and/or career area based upon his or her interests, values and personality. Talk with them about the courses and activities he or she enjoys. Students discover new things about themselves throughout the college experience. Your willingness to listen will provide support for your student and will motivate them to keep you informed about their progress (JobWeb: www.jobweb.com).

- Reinforce the importance of completing internships- they are a great way for students to “reality test” career fields of interest and build a resume.

- Educate your student about the importance of networking. Talking with family, friends and acquaintances who are working in fields of interest, often referred to as “informational interviewing”, can be extremely helpful in educating students about career paths.

Based on the information and data presented in this article, it is clear that major does not necessarily equal career. No matter where your student is in the process of choosing a major or career field, encourage your family member to be PROACTIVE and visit the Career Center (www.careercenter.sjsu.edu) EARLY to learn about specific programs and services such as individual career counseling and job search assistance and career/major exploration workshops. Our team of Career Consultants can be an asset to facilitating your family member’s career and major-related decision-making.