At CCE, we get a lot of questions from students about the connection between majors and career choices. We have compiled a list of most commonly asked questions, and encourage you to speak further with CCE career counselors, advisors, faculty members, alumni, and mentors to learn more!

1. **If I want a career in…, what should I major in?**
2. **How important is my major to finding employment?**
3. **Which majors make the most money?**
4. **What if I’m an international student?**

1. **If I want a career in…, what should I major in?**

There are no straight lines from one major to one particular career, and vice versa. Columbia emphasizes a liberal arts education that provides the critical thinking, problem-solving and communications skills that all employers seek. According to a recent study by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, “4 out of 5 employers agree that all students should acquire broad knowledge in the liberal arts and sciences.” And, in fact, employers seeking Columbia candidates do not often use major as a criterion for accepting applications. In LionSHARE, the vast majority of all internships and full time positions for undergrads posted in 2015 were open to all majors or a diverse range of majors. Job descriptions are more focused on the skills needed to be successful in the job. Take a look at the requirements for an entry-level role at Ogilvy, a global public relations, advertising, and marketing firm. Notice that they don’t mention a specific major!

- You have the instincts of a business person plus a creative edge
- You are digitally savvy
- You have excellent written and verbal communication skills
- You are passionate about marketing and advertising
- You take a rigorous and creative approach to problem solving
- You take initiative and are persistent

The exception is technical jobs, where majors can matter more. For example, Google’s software developer position was posted in LionSHARE for computer science, electrical engineering and computer engineering majors only (but that doesn’t mean you can’t learn these skills in other ways or find ways to apply to jobs through alternative methods like networking).

Note: International students please review question four for more specific information about the connection between your major and career.

**TAKE ACTION!**

- Read the descriptions of interesting jobs in LionSHARE or other job boards like Indeed.com. What do the employers list as their major requirements? What are the top skills/qualifications they expect?
- View examples of Columbia alumni who have studied something they loved and gone on to pursue successful careers that might not have an obvious connection. Type a major into the “search profiles” field of the LinkedIn Alumni Portal at Linkedin.com/alumni.
2. **How important is my major to finding employment?**

Your major can definitely demonstrate relevant coursework and knowledge to a prospective employer, but your studies aren’t the only aspect of your experience that employers are evaluating. According to a recent study by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, “93% of employers agree that a candidate’s demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is more important than their undergraduate major.” Employers look at a candidate’s full package of experience (inside and outside of the classroom), coursework (inside and outside of one’s major), skills (developed through classes or self taught), and accomplishments. They select people who they believe can do the job (have the right skills), want the job (have demonstrated an interest in the field) and are a personality fit for the team and organization. In fact, most of the skills/qualities sought by employers are transferrable and/or soft skills that students can gain through classes (especially the Core), extracurricular activities, internships, volunteer experiences, or part time jobs including:

1. Ability to work in a team structure  
2. Ability to make decisions and solve problems  
3. Ability to verbally communicate with persons inside and outside the organization  
4. Ability to plan, organize, and prioritize work  
5. Ability to obtain and process information  
6. Ability to analyze quantitative data  
7. Technical knowledge related to the job  
8. Proficiency with computer software programs  
9. Ability to create and/or edit written reports  
10. Ability to sell or influence others

*Source: National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2015 Job Outlook*

For employers that get high numbers of applicants, they are more likely to screen by GPA. A 3.0 is common and very competitive positions look at 3.5 and above only. To that end, we often see that students who major in a subject they have a genuine interest in are more likely to earn higher GPAs. Additionally, you never know when your major may be a common interest with an employer or if your unique area of study will help you stand out in a pile of resumes. And, tailoring your resumes and cover letters to specific opportunities will also help you stand out, no matter what your major. Finally, it’s important to know that approximately 70% of people find their jobs through networking, so building relationships early and regularly with people in your fields of interest is vital.

**TAKE ACTION!**

- Assess your skills through informal exercises like [this one](#) from the CCE website, or more formal assessments like the SkillScan card sort (to be completed with a counselor).

- Type your preferred skills or major into a career database like [O*NET](#) or [InsideJobs.com](#). Which careers use these skills/knowledge areas?

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3. **Which majors make the most money?**

*The industry and type of position you decide to pursue have greater impact on the amount of money you make after graduation as compared to your major.*

For instance, if you studied anthropology but learned computer programming through a concentration or self-study, you might decide to pursue a position in computer programming after graduation and make the same salary as someone who majored in computer science. The same would be true for a financial engineering major who decides to pursue a communications position. This student would be making the same salary as an art history major who decides to pursue a position in the same field. So, remember, your major is just one piece of the salary puzzle. Some of the top paying industries, regardless of major, include oil and gas extraction ($67,800), motor vehicle manufacturing ($64,867), and pharmaceutical manufacturing ($64,621) (Nationwide figures from National Association of Colleges and Employers Salary Survey, January 2015). There are other factors that can also impact your salary beyond your major. For instance, two additional influences include the location of the job (i.e. a major city versus rural location) and one’s level of education.
Students who major in science, technology, engineering, and math – and secure positions where they are using these skills – typically have the highest starting salaries after graduation.

Students with majors in Computer Engineering, Computer Science, Mechanical Engineering, and Electrical Engineering are amongst those with the highest starting salaries. According to the NACE salary survey, the overall salary for engineering graduates nationwide is $64,891. Starting salaries of math and science graduates average $56,171. Outside of the technical fields, there’s very little discrepancy in starting salary among humanities ($45,042) and social science ($49,047) majors.

But, according to a PayScale, Inc. study (2008), graduates in every major from English to Electrical Engineering were able to increase their salary by 70-97 percent ten years after graduation. And, according to a study by the Association of American Colleges & Universities, “liberal arts and science majors close earnings gaps with professional majors” between graduation and peak earning ages.

TAKE ACTION!

☐ Explore a career’s salary growth potential through the Occupational Outlook Handbook from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Research salary estimates through websites like Salary.com and the Indeed.com Salary Survey or by conducting informational interviews with professionals in the field.

4. What if I’m an international student?

For international students at Columbia under student visas, selecting your major can play a significant role if you plan to work in the US after completion of your degree. Optional Practical Training is a work authorization that allows an international student to work in a job directly related to the student’s major area of study either before or after degree completion. Employer sponsored H1B Visas also have similar strict requirements. Students with more questions about this should visit the International Student & Scholars Office (ISSO) and view CCE’s International Students webpage at careereducation.columbia.edu/students/International-Students.

TAKE ACTION!

☐ Attend joint programs between CCE and ISSO tailored to their job search on the CCE Calendar of Events (held in fall and spring)

☐ Review additional information on our web page for International Students and read the Frequently Asked Questions on the International Students Programs and Services webpage.