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Not all college majors are created equal

By [Michelle Singletary](#), Published: January 14

I have this game I play when I meet college students.

“What’s your major?” I ask.

The student might say, “English,” “psychology,” “political science” or “engineering.”

And then, in my mind, after factoring in some other information, I say to myself “job” or “no job,” depending on the major.

An English major with no internships or any plan of what she might do with the major to earn a living? No job.

A political science major with no internships that could lead to a specific job opportunity? No job, I think.

Engineering major with three relevant internships in the engineering field? Ding. Ding. We have a winner. Job.

Certainly a college degree is the ticket to many jobs. The unemployment rate for people with only a recent high school diploma is 22.9 percent, and it’s an astonishing 31.5 percent among recent high school dropouts. Nonetheless, the lack of career planning before a school is chosen, a major is selected and debt is borrowed is shocking to me. Not enough students – and their families who are also taking on student loans – are asking what their college major is worth in the workforce.

For years, long before the Great Recession and today’s almost 9 percent unemployment rate among new college graduates, I’ve been begging students and their parents to consider the fallout from their choice to borrow heavily to attend a school when the student has no clue about the expected career opportunities of a chosen major.

Too many students aren’t sure what job they could get after four, five or even six years of studying a certain major and racking up education loans. Many aren’t getting on-the-job training while they are in school or during their semester or summer breaks. As a result, questions about employment opportunities or what type of job they have the skills to attain are met with blank stares or the typical, “I don’t know.”

And don’t get me started on people who borrow heavily to get an advanced degree without really knowing whether it will lead to a fatter paycheck that can easily service the debt. In some cases it will, but for some academic disciplines, the salary bump isn’t as much as people expect.

Maybe a new report from the Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce will help encourage students to make better choices about which college and degrees they pursue. “Hard Times: College Majors, Unemployment and Earnings: Not All College

“Degrees Are Created Equal” answers the question that many people are asking in the aftermath of the recession. Is college still worth it?

For most, it is. But it all depends on your major, the report concludes.

“It was true in the 1970s that the purpose of going to college was to get a degree because you could move through a lot of occupations,” said Anthony P. Carnevale, director of the Georgetown center. “But since then, the difference among degrees has grown substantially.”

Median annual earnings among recent college graduates vary from \$55,000 among engineering majors to \$30,000 in the arts. Education, psychology and social work majors have relatively low unemployment, but their earnings are also low and only improve marginally with experience and graduate education.

“Today’s best advice, then, is that high school students who can go on to college should do so – with one caveat,” the report’s authors write. “They should do their homework before picking a major because, when it comes to employment prospects and compensation, not all college degrees are created equal.”

A series of reports released by the Georgetown center has focused on matching jobs with majors. In 2010, the center warned about the growing disconnect between the types of jobs that employers need to fill and the number of people who have the education and training to fill them. The report, “Help Wanted: Projections of Jobs and Education Requirements Through 2018,” argues that students should align their postsecondary educational choices with available careers.

In the “Hard Times” report, the center found that the unemployment rate for recent graduates is highest in architecture (13.9 percent) because of the collapse of the construction and home-building industry. Not surprisingly, unemployment rates are generally higher in non-technical majors, such as the arts (11.1 percent), humanities and liberal arts (9.4 percent), social science (8.9 percent) and law and public policy (8.1 percent).

A college education is not an investment in your future if you are taking out loans just for the college experience. It’s not an investment if you’re not coupling your education with training. It’s not an investment if you aren’t researching which fields are creating good-paying jobs now and 30 years from now.

I wouldn’t want to discourage people from pursuing a career they love, even if the pay isn’t very high. However, that choice should be made with the understanding of which job opportunities might be available and weighing what you can expect to earn annually against the cost of taking on debt to finance your education.

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