

## Choosing a Major in the College of Arts and Sciences

To support the faculty's view that students should genuinely explore the curricular options at BC before selecting an undergraduate major, the current policy for students entering Arts and Sciences is that all *"major declarations" recorded at the time of admission or during the first freshman semester will be wiped from the academic record in the spring term of the student's freshman year. For students in Arts and Sciences, the undergraduate major will be chosen in consultation with the advisor and the choice registered during the spring break of the first year. Arts and Sciences students must choose their major before registering for their fifth undergraduate semester; many will choose to remain undeclared into the sophomore year.* The procedure itself is simple:

### **How to declare a major (nuts and bolts):**

- Second-semester freshmen simply send an email (after the "wipe-out) to "classyearmajors@bc.edu" (e.g., 2017majors@bc.edu)
- Undeclared sophomores should go to the office of their chosen major to declare
- Students wishing to change their major should go to the office of the new department. As they declare, they will also be able to drop the old major
- Students wishing to change the order in which double majors are listed (e.g., English/Philosophy to Philosophy/English) can make this change in the office of the department to be listed first. The first-listed department provides the primary academic advisor

The academic departments and programs still receive information from the admissions application Supplement, and community "lore" being what it is, advisees may confidently tell advisors that they have already "declared" their undergraduate major. Parents, as well, may believe that the choice has already been made, and the "choice," whatever it is, may be one in which a student's family has played a substantial role.

Many students in Arts and Sciences perceive a direct correlation between their undergraduate major and a projected post-graduation career or vocational choice. In addition, many students assume that a particular professional goal (medicine, for instance) dictates the choice of a specific undergraduate major (e.g., Biology or Chemistry). In fact, even health professions schools increasingly welcome students who have met specific entrance requirements while developing strong programs in another field. Students do their best work when they major or concentrate in the fields of their greatest interest. Staff members in BC's pre-professional programs and in the Career Center stand ready to support students in making major choices based on intellectual interests, while still planning realistically to meet professional or vocational goals. The Career Center has a helpful page addressing questions of special interest to students and their families: <http://www.bc.edu/offices/careers/careers/major/>.

Early and substantive conversations about the process of curricular exploration and decision-making are critically important. In talking with students about their major or concentration choice, it can be helpful to raise such questions as the following:

–What sorts of questions or issues most engage you? When you open a newspaper or a news magazine or watch TV news, what topics grab your attention first? What are you most curious about? Puzzled over?

–If you were to go through the course catalog with a highlighter, marking the courses that look most interesting (without worrying about whether you’re “qualified” to take them or whether they “meet requirements,” etc.), what patterns might your choices reveal?

–What courses at BC or in high school have meant the most to you – and why?

–What do you most enjoy reading or thinking about when left to your own interests and direction?

–What jobs or volunteer work have you been involved with and what do those involvements tell you about your interests and abilities?

–What courses have you done best in at BC? During high school? What can your performance tell you about your talents? About the style of work with which you may be most comfortable? (For instance, some students prefer to work “in spurts,” reading and writing for long stretches at a time and then sitting back for a day or two to “consolidate” material; others prefer to work steadily day by day, approaching their work in carefully planned segments.)

Ultimately, the choice of major or concentration may evolve quite easily and naturally from these sorts of ongoing conversations. If it does not – and if an advisee seems intellectually paralyzed by the need to choose, or reluctant to consider options he or she is “sure” family members would “never approve” – conversations with staff members in the Career Center or at Counseling Services can often help. So can planning for an internship or volunteer experience, or a campus job – an experience that allows students to test out the sort of work they are considering.

A painful case is that of the advisee determined to pursue a field in which he or she has been relatively *unsuccessful* at the college level: the would-be biology major and physician, for example, who struggles in every mathematics, chemistry, and biology course, and who continues to teeter on the edge of academic disaster every term while doggedly pursuing a “lifelong” dream (or the lifelong dream of family members deeply invested both financially and emotionally in the student’s choices). There is no quick or easy way to help such students open themselves to alternate choices, and advisors should enlist the help of Advising Center staff members and deans early in what will necessarily be a time-consuming and difficult process. First and foremost, of course, it is critically important to help students realize their genuine abilities, to identify what has attracted them to areas in which they’ve struggled, and to seek potential areas in which the student’s interests can find satisfying and successful expression.

#### Alternatives to the Single-Track Major

Students may double major at BC, and Boston College also offers an array of departmental and interdisciplinary minors. Many students assume that more is better, and in this age of credentialing may seek to amass as many credentials as they can. While there are circumstances in which a double major is appropriate, and many circumstances in which departmental minors or interdepartmental minors can highlight a student’s broad interests and the choice to pursue advanced work in more than a single field, advisors should encourage students first to consider broad combinations of courses rather than requirements in looking at choices beyond the major. Ultimately, the student’s ability to explain to a potential graduate school or employer *how and why* the student planned the academic program as s/he did, and how the student consciously chose his or her combination of courses, will be more impressive, more indicative of clear academic and personal direction, and more persuasive of planning skills and personal responsibility than simply meeting requirements for various credentials.

CSOM students may pursue a double major within Arts and Sciences; Arts and Sciences students may *not* pursue a double major within CSOM. They may, however, take up to 24 credits in CSOM or in other BC schools on a space-available basis. Arts and Sciences students also may pursue teaching certification through LSOE; they should be referred to Rebecca Schmitz at [rebecca.murphy.84@bc.edu](mailto:rebecca.murphy.84@bc.edu) for specific details.

### Transition to the Major

When sophomores declare a major, or at the end of the freshman year in the case of students who register their choice during their second term at BC, students move into their departments and are advised by departmental faculty.

The arrangements for advising of declared majors differ from department to department. *What is important is that pre-major advisors help students to make the advising transition and to “connect” with their major department.* The major declaration marks an important milestone for many students, and students are often disappointed that others do not recognize it as a significant event. Pre-major advisors will want to wish their advisees well as the students move on. They should ensure that the student knows the location of the major department’s office, and they should direct the student to that office, where the student will at least be welcomed by a department staff member, provided with whatever materials the department makes available to its majors, and in some departments, offered an opportunity either to select an advisor or to provide information helpful to the department in making an advisor pairing for the upper class years. A follow-up email from the pre-major advisor, checking to make sure that the transition went well and expressing interest in occasionally hearing from the advisee “how things are going,” can help personalize the transition and can remind the advisee of the pre-major advisor’s continuing interest in him or her as a BC student. Advisors will likely find that many former advisees do keep in touch. While the former advisor will want to make clear the new responsibility of the major department for the student’s formal advising, it is the highest form of compliment to the pre-major advisor’s work when advisees return voluntarily just to “touch base.”