

Want to change your major? You're not alone; [Chicago Final Edition]

Steve Stanek, Special to the Tribune. Chicago Tribune. Chicago, Ill.: Jul 31, 2005. pg. 1

(Copyright 2005 by the Chicago Tribune)

Special section: Education Today

Katie Brown of Mahomet graduated in May from Illinois State University in Bloomington with a double major in English and psychology, but struggled with her decision along the way.

"I wanted to go into psychology but didn't meet a math requirement in high school," she said. So she started college as a general studies student with a minor in religious studies.

"I changed to a writing minor while working to become a psych major, and I really liked the English courses I was taking, so I declared English as my major first and psych as my second major," she said.

Brown is one of millions of college students--about one-third of all college students, by some estimates--who change majors before earning their undergraduate degree.

Some change because they are disenchanted with their original field. Others do it because they realize they may not have what it takes to succeed in the original field, said Michelle Relyea, a counselor at ReadyMinds.com and a case manager and assistant dean of academic and instructional resources at Long Island University in Brooklyn, N.Y. ReadyMinds.com is a national distance career counseling and training organization based in Lyndhurst, N.J.

"Close to 33 percent of students change from one major to another," Relyea said. "At schools where students don't have to declare a major when they begin, 60 percent will change from undecided to the major of their choice, so statistics can sometimes be skewed because of that."

Relyea said many incoming college students really don't know what they want to study. If the school requires them to declare a major, they pick one that sounds good at the time. As they get exposed to a variety of courses in their freshman and sophomore years, they learn what interests them and change majors or choose one if they enrolled without declaring a major.

Others pick a major because they feel pressured by their parents. After a year or two, they change their major to the field of their choice, she said.

Certain majors see especially high turnover, because of rigorous requirements, she said.

Math, science trigger changes

"Biology, chemistry, pre-pharmacy, pre-physical therapy, pre-nursing all experience high major change rates due to students not being able to handle the intense math and science courses," Relyea said.

At Illinois State University in Normal, about 25 percent of incoming students are undecided, said Kris Harding, assistant director of admissions.

"My outlook is if a student comes in undecided, that student has room to explore," Harding said. "As far as changing majors, say from a business major to a psych major, that can be stressful, depending on how early the change is made. If it's in the junior or senior year and they have completed course work, that can be stressful. It may take longer to finish. They see other classmates moving on.

"Financially, it can be somewhat of a burden. In working with parents, we know they want their children to be out in four years. Depending on when the change is made and the majors involved, you might not be out in four years, so there are extra tuition costs and other costs."

Harding said the majors at SIU that have the highest turnover are those heavy in math and science.

As an academic adviser, she works mainly with nursing students. Many entered the field "because they may have had someone in their past help them or a member of the family, but that student may not have the ability to perform well in those classes. The theme I get is, 'I can't perform with the math,'" she said.

At the University of Chicago, associate dean of students Francisco Santamarina said many students enter to pursue the sciences and later change majors.

"Once they are exposed to the broad offerings that a liberal arts institution like this has to offer, it begins to open their minds to new areas," Santamarina said. "Sometimes interests shift because they pursue study abroad, and they see they have the aptitude to study different countries and cultures."

Double majors, minors help

University of Chicago allows double majors, and some departments also offer minors, which Santamarina said many students pursue "as a way to find an academically cohesive way of pursuing another field they are interested in."

University of Chicago has a system of advising that is done by faculty members in each department and by professional advisers. One goal of this system is to have students meeting enough with their advisers so that, if the decision is made to switch majors, it happens soon enough that it doesn't have financial consequences, Santamarina said.

"In the first two years, students are usually fulfilling general education requirements. There is time built in for students to make decisions about what they want to pursue," he said. "A change made early usually doesn't have financial consequences."

When Kristy Langstraat of Bensenville entered Elmhurst College, she settled on elementary education as her major, but her heart wasn't in it.

It was on a patch of land she imagined herself owning in Iowa. After two years she changed her major to communications, one step toward her eventual goal of grain farming.

"I didn't struggle with the decision to change," she said. "I've always wanted to be a farmer. My parents didn't want me to do that. I figured to get a bachelor's degree in communications would be helpful no matter what job I have. If I do get into farming, this could only help me."

She graduated with a degree in communications last May--the change of major caused her to spend a fifth year at Elmhurst College--and is now enrolled at Joliet Junior College, where she plans to finish in May 2007 with an associate's degree in agricultural production.

Talk to adviser first

Elmhurst College last year changed its policy so that students in the center for business and economics no longer can change majors at will.

"When they come to the advising office, many students are just filling out the form (to change majors), which has been a concern to me," said Elizabeth Smith, assistant dean and college registrar.

"We didn't find them talking with faculty advisers or us. I think students should have to talk with an adviser in the program."

She said many students change majors because they have trouble with certain required courses, such as math.

"Maybe they don't need to change out of that major because of the math problems," she said. "There is tutoring and other help that could help that student stay in the major."

The costs for an extra year at Elmhurst College can range from \$21,600 for a commuter student to \$28,506 for a resident student, Smith said.

"Our philosophy is students should sample," she said. "Still, a lot of students are professionally bound. They want to be in the business world. They may not be eager to bounce around. If their parents are assisting, they certainly are not enthusiastic about paying for an extra year."

[Illustration]

PHOTOS 2; Caption: PHOTO (color): Kristy Langstraat (left), who switched from elementary education to farming, helps Elmhurst College student Christi Thigpen at orientation. Tribune photo by John Dziekan. PHOTO: Kristy Langstraat (right), with Elmhurst College student Christi Thigpen, graduated from Elmhurst in May and returned to work at orientation. Tribune photo by John Dziekan.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.

Subjects: Academic degrees, College students
Document types: Feature
Section: *Education Today*
ISSN/ISBN: 10856706
Text Word Count 1226
Document URL: