Choosing a Major in Public Health

When it comes to big life decisions, choosing a major is one of them. It’s a process that deserves time and attention—don’t want to jump in too quickly! There are many thoughts and emotions tied into the decision-making process. As you go through the process, it can be easy for people and situations to sway you. When it comes down to it, though, you need to be your own influence.

Don’t let others be your only influence when they say things like, “You’ll be the next lawyer in the family” or “You need a professional major, not a liberal arts one, in order to make any kind of money.” There will always be critics and people with good intentions. However, your voice is the one that ultimately matters. It’s about examining who you are and what’s important to you. It’s about determining your interests and abilities. And, in the end, it’s about deciding what major will satisfy you in a number of ways.

Identify your Interests:
Take a few minutes to brainstorm everything that you’re interested in onto a piece of paper. Don’t judge or censor yourself—just jot it all down. The list can include anything! The process of choosing a major often starts with this simple step. These are the things you like to do, the things in life that have captured your interest. Ask yourself a few more questions to discover other areas of interest.

For instance:
- What activities are you drawn to?
- If you had free time this weekend, what would you choose to do?
- What topics do you like to read about?
- How do you answer when folks ask what you’re interested in? Why?

Now, keep these interests in mind. It’s a piece of the puzzle as you determine which major will fit you best.

Explore Your Values:
Having a major that matches your values is essential. Few people can stand spending so much time with a subject that ethically doesn’t fit. And, once you get out into the real world, you’ll feel much more committed to a job that you value. What does that mean to you—valuing your work? How do you hope to feel about the major, and, later, the job that you ultimately choose? Here are a few other values-oriented questions to ask yourself:

- What classes have felt most worthwhile to you so far?
- Why did you place that value on them?
- What are the key values you hope to have in the workplace? Making a difference? Making money? Making a reputation?

Your values can be one of your guides as you search for a fit.

Acknowledge Your Abilities:
Chances are that you’re able to do quite a few things! Just look at what you’re able to accomplish in your academic, social, work, and extracurricular life. These abilities can lend a clue as you determine which major to pursue. So, take stock of your abilities by asking yourself a few questions:

- What were my best subjects in high school?
- What are my best subjects in college?
- What talents have I used in my past jobs?
- What skills do I bring to my extracurricular activities?
- What abilities help me do a good job during community service projects?
- What talents would I like to develop?
Use Available Resources:

There are many resources available to you as you decide which major to pursue. Here’s just a sampling.

Your Career Center
Nothing beats talking face-to-face with one of the well trained career counselors. This office can also refer you to assessment instruments at the Educational Resource and Counseling Center (ERC). Plus, check out the Career Center websites for additional online resources. The Uptown Career Center website is found at www.hiretulane.com. The downtown Public Health Career Center website is found at http://www.sph.tulane.edu/main/career-center/index.htm. For career information just for public health undergraduates, the Undergraduate Bachelor of Science in Public Health (BSPH) program has its own website at http://www.sph.tulane.edu/bsph/career.htm. Explore career profiles, links to opportunities in the field, and sample job descriptions.

Your Advisor
Your academic advisor isn’t just there to sign off on your classes before registration. He/she is there to help you navigate the academic waters and make good choices. That’s why it’s important to be proactive in establishing a relationship with your advisor. Talk through your dilemma when it comes to choosing a major. Academic Advising for public health is in Stanley Thomas Hall on the Uptown Campus. See http://www.sph.tulane.edu/bsph/advising.htm for information online.

Faculty and Department Chairs
As you’re searching for information about certain majors, why not talk with faculty members and department chairs? They know their majors inside and out, after all, and can share nuances with you that you may not have considered. So, get in there and make an appointment to do an informational interview. Ask questions about classes offered within the major, internship/field study requirements, what students can do with such a major and more. Show an interest and they’re bound to reciprocate. Faculty in the BSPH program are listed online at http://www.sph.tulane.edu/bsph/faculty.htm.

Upperclass Students in Your Majors of Interest
Ask your advisor to help hook you up with an upperclass student in a major that interests you. Then pick that person’s brain. It could be one of the best 45-minute periods you’ll ever spend!

Alumni
Tulane Community, online at www.tulanecommunity.com, is a place where alumni can register to share information about what they are up to now that they’ve graduated. See if you can get contact information for alum in your major of interest or that have pursued a career that you might like and ask them about their experience at Tulane and what they might recommend.

Remember to use a variety of resources.
Knowledge is Power!