

## The 5 Lowest Paying Majors, and What You Can Do about It

by Donald Asher

What are the lowest paying majors? Why would that matter? And what can you do about it if you are attracted to one of the lower-paying majors?

According to the *College Majors Handbook*<sup>1</sup>, the five lowest paying majors are:

1. **Social Work**
2. **Special Education**
3. **Elementary Education**
4. **Home Economics**
5. **Music & Dance**

Contrary to popular wisdom, English majors do okay in the job market. The social work major leads to the lowest pay. Chemical engineering, the highest paying major, leads to roughly twice the pay of social workers and elementary teachers! The bottom ten also include drama, leisure studies, philosophy, art, and of all things, audiology. The entire list is on pp. 69-71 of the *College Majors Handbook*.

So, if a student is equally interested in photography and physics, generally prudent advice would be to pursue photography as a hobby and go ahead and major in physics, which leads to jobs that pay almost double as much as photography. But this advice breaks down when the student is not *equally* interested in photography and physics, and when the student is not suited, developmentally or in terms of skills and talents, to the higher paying choice. Most people who major in social work don't have an interest in or the preparation for a major in engineering, chemistry, or physics and, one could argue, vice versa.

It is also important to remember that these are average outcomes. Some people are not average; some people are exceptional. They could major in basket weaving and still earn millions. Martha Stewart makes flower arrangements and cooks light afternoon repasts, for example, but most people would be happy with her income.

Passion is required for success in most fields. Martha Stewart is passionate. A worker with passion tries harder, works longer hours, pursues the interest on her own and without direction from superiors, and invests her own time and money into her career development. Over time that leads to greater success than the average for her peers. So choosing a major that the student is passionate about may be a better choice than one that pays, on average, more.

Also, some people experience an extraordinarily strong pull toward certain callings. They just *know* they are an opera singer or a teacher or a minister, and they are not deterred by news of the relative low pay of these professions. Some people have a destiny. What if Salvador Dalí had become a civil engineer? What if Einstein had become a physician? What if Elvis Presley had listened to his teachers? So anyone advising young people about academic direction has to be on the lookout for genius, or anyone with an

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<sup>1</sup> College Majors Handbook, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., by Neeta Fogg, Paul Harrington, Thomas Harrington, JIST Works, 2004.

overdeveloped sense of intent. For many people, it is better to try to be a novelist and fail than to be steered away from that goal by some well-meaning authority figure.

Most academic advisors counsel students not to choose a major based solely on what it may pay. A complex amalgam of interests, skills and talents, prior experiences, academic preparation, goals, family connections, and lifestyle priorities go into the choice.

An advisor can help a student beat the odds with these suggestions:

**Mix the major and minor to increase the likelihood for success.** Add a minor or a second major that adds practicality to the student's curriculum. The art major that minors in business has a different set of options than the art major who minors in architectural history. It is important to note, however, that many of the lowest-paying majors are in fact career-oriented. Elementary education is an incredibly practical choice, in terms of career preparation. So this option is useful for only those students who have a major unconnected to a specific career direction.

**Go to graduate school.** The biggest influence on lifetime income, bigger by far than undergraduate major or gender or hours worked, is graduate education. Your undergraduate major is not that important if you get an MBA, or go to law school, or go to medical school, or get a doctorate. An advanced degree eclipses the undergraduate experience entirely. So students who *know* they are going to graduate school are free to major in whatever they want, as long as it prepares them for admission to that graduate program. Medical schools don't care if you major in English literature, as long as you take the pre-med core and you ace the MCATs, and law schools don't care what you major in, either.

**Get the right internships.** In many, many cases, internships are more important than a student's major. If you want to get a job with ESPN or Major League Baseball, a prior internship in media or sports is the key, not a major in communications or sports management. You can major in classics or poetics and get glamour jobs if you get glamour internships. Family connections, gumption and moxie, and a close relationship with your school's internship guru can lead to success no matter what major you pursue.

**Develop extraordinary talents.** If you check the majors of famous people, you find a wide range of college majors. A bachelor's degree today is the equivalent of a high school diploma of a generation ago. It's a beginning point, a ticket into the game. The most talented people in the nation pursue their talents and passions all their lives, and the undergraduate major is just, in the long run, not that big a deal. Who cares what Oprah's major was? Or Martha Stewart's? Or Barack Obama's? If a student has extraordinary talents, the major is not such a determinant of success.

So, yes, the major matters, but it is certainly not a simple equation. One major is not inherently *better* than another. It depends on the student, his goals, his talents, his family, his connections, and even a bit on that elusive factor known as luck.

BIO:

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