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**Let's Kill the College Major**

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A proposal for a [new university in Canada](http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/pepg/publications/vision/notices/centennialcollege.pdf) recently caught my eye for a host of reasons, not the least of which is that its students wouldn’t have majors. Instead, the students would be able to “distinguish themselves through practical and demonstrable skills in four areas of focus—technology, entrepreneurship/management, health professions, and creative industries.”

For most college students, the idea of a major is outdated in a 21st Century economy in a constant state of flux. College majors are for the most part an organizing function for the faculty of an institution who want to have departments for their academic disciplines.

Sure, students need a structured curriculum to follow in order to get the classes they need to take a licensing exam or apply to medical school, but most majors don’t have such specific requirements. Do you need to be an undergraduate business major to take the GMAT and apply to business school? No.

As high-school students tour campuses this summer or their older counterparts get ready to start college this fall, instead of asking them their major, we should ask them one simple question: What problems do you want to solve?

Most 18-year-olds have no idea what they want to be when they grow up (many adults don’t, either, of course). But you can get many would-be college students to talk quite passionately about what they want to fix in the world. From such conversations, you can imagine a whole set of courses at almost any college that would engage such students but don’t fit neatly into a major's bucket: find renewable sources of energy; bring water to the the drought-striken West; improve the delivery of news around the world.

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Stanford University recently called such a pathway, [“purpose learning.”](http://www.stanford2025.com/purpose-learning/) As part of a yearlong [design exercise to rethink undergraduate education](http://www.stanford2025.com/), students suggested doing away with the major and replacing it with a “mission.”

Under such a scenario, the “I’m a biology major,” was replaced with “I’m learning human biology to eliminate world hunger,” or “I’m learning Computer Science and Political Science to rebuild how citizens engage with their governments.”

The goal of the exercise was to “help students select a meaningful course of study while in school, and then scaffold a clear arc for the first 10 - 15 years of their professional lives.”

For many students, a major is just a box to check on an application anyway. By the end of their first year, 1 in 4 freshmen change their minds about their field of study anyway. Another half of first-year students say they plan to change majors.

Students have plenty of options to choose from, of course. As a marketing strategy, colleges in recent years have come up with crazy new majors to entice students to enroll, from sports management to web design. Since 2000, there has been a 20% increase in the number of majors at American colleges and universities, according to an analysis of the U.S. Education Department data. A third of those new programs were in just two fields: health professions and military technologies/ applied sciences. The 1990s saw similar growth in the number of majors. Indeed, nearly 4 in 10 majors on today’s government list didn’t exist in 1990.

It's time to kill the major or at the very least reduce the emphasis on it during the college application process and the first year of school.

*Jeffrey Selingo is author of the forthcoming e-book,* [*MOOC U: Who Is Getting the Most Out of Online Education and Why*](http://amzn.to/1nRpDRz), *due out September 2 from Simon & Schuster. You can pre-order it now for $2.99 at* [*Amazon*](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B00M593VY6/ref=as_li_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=B00M593VY6&linkCode=as2&tag=mooc-preorder-email-20&linkId=JNC2QVBEWUQU7ZRN)*,* [*Barnes & Noble*](http://bit.ly/1okzR7j)*, and* [*iTunes*](http://bit.ly/1o4c5m1)*.*

*His first book,* [*College (Un)Bound: The Future of Higher Education and What It Means for Students*](http://www.amazon.com/College-Unbound-Future-Education-Students/dp/0544027078)*, was published last year and was a* New York Times[*best selling education book*](http://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/12/18/reading-list-the-top-75-new-york-times-best-selling-education-books-of-2013/?smid=tw-share)*. He is a contributing editor at* The Chronicle of Higher Education *and a professor of practice at Arizona State University.*

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