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Why Every Undergraduate Should Pursue a Minor



USC president C. L. Max Nikias says a minor can be more impactful to a career than a major.
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By C. L. Max Nikias

Every year, I meet a particular kind of driven student: She has every detail of her life laid out in full, from class choice to her future 45-year career. And every year I ask: What's the rush, and why the narrow focus?

Even before college, most students are advised to stay on a particular formulaic path—whether it's law, medicine or engineering. But while it is natural for students to worry about choosing the right career, finding an early path is not for everyone. After all, is it reasonable to expect 17- and 18-year-olds to fully understand all of their academic interests and professional aspirations?

That is why I always suggest undergraduate

students pursue a minor—preferably in an unrelated field—in addition to whatever major they have chosen. But unfortunately, some of the nation's leading research universities offer few minors or, in some cases, none at all. In other cases, core curriculums prove so onerous that students lack the freedom to explore additional courses.

The minor could be in subjects as varied as American popular culture and neuroscience. But whatever the subject, we have found that students who choose this path to supplement their primary coursework graduate with higher GPAs. Over the long term, I believe they also set themselves up for better careers.

Here is why.

Adding a minor to one's portfolio is a special opportunity to gain a diverse skill set or perspective. Sometimes, a minor can be more impactful to a career than a major. A biology major who minors in philosophy can hone her critical-thinking skills and apply that to any future field of endeavor outside of the sciences. Having such a minor can help students prepare perhaps not only for their first job, but also for their second, third or fourth. Or perhaps, a minor will come into play when executing a complete midlife career change.

This is particularly significant when you consider how careers are made today. Two generations ago, one could reasonably expect

to keep a job with the same organization from graduation to retirement. Today's professionals, on the other hand, must prepare themselves to work in various fields for multiple companies. This is especially the case for millennials. A recent LinkedIn study showed that the number of organizations college graduates work for during the first decade of their careers has almost doubled over the last 25 years—from about 2.5 to nearly four.

It's clear that the age of specialization went out with the 20th century. In that period, we rewarded the person who was extremely good at one thing. Today's era is more about building bridges between entirely different specialties. The talented entrepreneur wishing to conduct business in China has a better chance if he incorporates cultural studies and ethics into his international foray. The skilled surgeon hoping to revolutionize patient care will make a greater impact

by assimilating engineering, art and psychology into her practice.

The most impactful technological innovations of our generation were only possible through a fundamental understanding and fusion of multiple fields. Consider the inception of the Internet, the introduction of smart devices like the iPhone, and the advent today of virtual-reality applications. These advances are as much about engineering as they are about media; and as much about technology as they are about design and a comprehensive grasp of human behavior.

Essentially, by expanding one's knowledge and interdisciplinary thinking, a minor not only opens up additional career possibilities, but also unlocks greater potential for innovation. And this is exactly why I take every opportunity I can to advise students that a minor can help them increase their prospects for professional and creative achievement.



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