

April 20, 2008

GUIDANCE COUNSELOR

What's Your Minor?

By [MICHELLE SLATALLA](#)

DO minors matter? I need to know — right now, please — because as my second daughter sits across the table compiling an “apply to” list that favors the sort of university that offers lots of them, I am writing checks totaling \$46,180 for a child at a college with no minors.

Tuition-paying parents get a little nervous without a focused student.

“Parents sometimes feel they’re getting their money’s worth if their child has a major and a minor,” confirms Laura Avila, assistant director of undergraduate advising at the [University of Washington](#) in Seattle, which offers about 100 minors. But not all colleges offer them, and most of the rest don’t require them.

Tara Stopfel, assistant dean for academic advising at the [University of Cincinnati](#), explains: “Whether a minor is important really depends on a student’s reasons for wanting one.”

1. WHAT A MINOR CAN DO FOR YOU

I can’t remember what my minor was. Or, come to think of it, if I even had one. In those days, a secondary area of study was usually either an afterthought or evidence of an abandoned major.

A generation later, minors have more cachet, for practical and theoretical reasons. “A minor is a hidden weapon,” says Joe Cuseo, an author of “Thriving in College and Beyond: Research-Based Strategies for Academic Success and Personal Development.” “It can be a good marketing tool, or it can be a way to explore a second interest and still graduate in a reasonable time.”

Minors, along with double majors, are increasingly popular as students try to master multiple subjects on the way to flexible careers or future education. “Students understand that a minor can give them better leverage in the job search after college,” says Ms. Stopfel; at her university, students with minors “probably have doubled within the past five years or so.”

“You’ve heard of diversifying a financial portfolio,” she says. “Well, we say a minor can diversify your educational portfolio.”

Having a secondary area of study can signal to a job interviewer that you have concrete expertise, especially in business or a foreign language. It can also set you apart from all the other graduate school applicants.

Graduate admissions officers are just the sort of people who are likely to read your transcript thoroughly, and a minor could indicate you did more work than the average undergraduate.

“We are running out of the traditional tools with which superb students can sort of document how good they

are,” says Barmak Nassirian, spokesman for the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers. “It used to be enough that you graduated from X, Y or Z university with summa cum laude. But now instead of separating you from the crowd, summa cum laude is the crowd. Some students are resorting to double degrees, two majors, majors and two minors, the sort of degree accomplishments that would have been unnecessary a generation or two ago.”

2. HALF THE TIME, AND EFFORT

A minor is a quicker path to a specialization than a double major. While requirements vary widely among institutions, completing a minor generally takes about half the coursework of a major. A history major at Georgetown, for instance, must take at least 11 history courses; a minor in history requires six. At Bentley College in Massachusetts, finance majors complete eight finance courses; a minor requires four.

3. O.K., YOU WANT ONE. HOW DO YOU PICK?

Minors can either counterbalance or complement a main area of study.

“Think of it as declaring an interest and specialty that you wouldn’t necessarily have if all you had was a collection of electives,” says Mr. Cuseo. “If your passion is English or art, and you’re worried about whether that’s going to be practical enough, a minor in computer science or business increases your marketability.”

Similarly, a biology major with a business minor may look attractive to a biotech startup.

Many colleges are creating minors that integrate academics with life after graduation. “We’re trying to break away from the silo-ed experience and broaden students’ context of the world,” says Ms. Avila. At the University of Washington, for example, students pursuing minors in disability studies and in diversity take courses in class, gender and race issues. At the University of California, Los Angeles, undergraduates may choose among 76 minors, including the interdisciplinary “civic engagement” and “environmental systems and society,” as well as the more traditional English and mathematics.

4. THE CASE AGAINST MINORS

Is it too much to ask that young people develop the necessary skills to become gainfully employed one day?

Many academic advisers say it’s important to keep an eye on the big picture. The liberal arts argument holds that undergraduates should explore broadly, and a minor channels a student into a less varied course of study.

“Both premature and overrated,” John R. Thelin, a professor of education at the [University of Kentucky](#) and author of “A History of American Higher Education,” says of minors. “Let’s say you have an undergraduate specialization in physics. That doesn’t mean you’re ready to work as a physicist.”

[Yale](#) has majors but no minors. Joseph W. Gordon, dean of undergraduate education, explains: “We definitely believe that concentration in the sense of learning one subject and going at it from an introductory to an intermediate to an advanced to an independent level is important, a hallmark of university education.

“But, we share the liberal arts philosophy that breadth is equally important and that people should explore

and learn about all kinds of things.”

Faculty members, though, have recently proposed that the committee on majors look into offering minors, Mr. Gordon says. “The one advantage I’ve heard people say is that instead of having a miscellany of courses, a minor organizes the choices.”

Colleges without minors may offer another way to pursue a secondary focus.

Students at Williams, for example, can declare a concentration in one of about a dozen interdisciplinary topics — including Jewish studies, Latino studies and environmental studies — in programs that don’t offer majors. In the past five years, the number of students who have graduated with at least one concentration has more than doubled, says James G. Kolesar, assistant to the president for public affairs.

Still others, like Bennington, where my daughter is a freshman, eschew the whole system. Students develop their own programs of study, creating not just unofficial minors but unofficial majors as well. I’ll be excited to see whether my other daughter chooses a similar college or one with a more traditional approach. And even more excited to learn how much it will cost.

Michelle Slatalla writes the Cyberfamilies column for The Times.

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