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TO DECLARE OR NOT TO DECLARE, THAT IS THE QUESTION: AN EXPLORATION OF CAL POLY'S ADMISSIONS POLICY

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Declaring a major is one of the hardest and most important decisions a high school student has to make when applying for college. At the young age of 17 or 18, students are left with the monumental decision of deciding which career they wish to pursue for the rest of their lives. High school simply does not offer enough time or experience to make a well-thought-out decision, and that's why 80% of college bound seniors haven't chosen a major [MNSBC]. Most universities understand this issue and accommodate freshman with the "undeclared" option. The idea is that students are able to pursue a wide range of classes that spark their interest to get a better idea of where they want to specialize.

This exploration process is not available to students applying to Cal Poly, however. Cal Poly San Luis Obispo is one of the only colleges in the nation that requires inbound freshman to declare a major, and this poses a problem for those undecided (Harris). A lot of students are forced to prematurely make their decision and end up in a program that's not best suited to their interests. In light of economic hardships that result from switching majors, the difficulty in Cal Poly's switching system, and statistical analysis proving that early major decisions are more likely to be renounced later in life, Cal Poly needs to rethink its admissions policy. In order to better match students' major choice with their interests and talents, Cal Poly should allow students to be admitted undeclared to offer a period of exploration before having to make the paramount choice of what to specialize in for the rest of their lives.

In order to be admitted to Cal Poly, students must declare their major during the application process. The rationale behind this seems to make sense at face value, but upon deeper inspection is arguably flawed. The claim is two-fold: declaring a major early allows for higher graduation rates, and freshman can start right away specializing in their field of interest without dabbling in unrelated classes like students at other schools. Walter Harris, Associate Director of Admissions and Recruitment, has this opinion of the process: "I believe you will find this learning method sets Cal Poly apart from other universities and causes more of our graduates to be hired than students from some other schools" (Harris). While Cal Poly may in fact have a higher proportion of graduates getting jobs, there's no statistical evidence linking this with the early declaration process. There are many other exogenous factors that aren't controlled for; for instance, maybe Cal Poly simply has brighter students and higher GPA's than some other schools. Another idea posited by Bennett-Thompson of Admissions is that "the declaration of a major is key to retaining students and having them graduate." In addition, she claimed that "one of the biggest reasons for [high graduation rates] is students are required to declare a major when they apply... once they're here, they know they want to be here" (qtd. in *Mustang Daily*).

The assumption behind these rationalizations is that incoming freshman have already made up their mind about what they want to specialize in; their decision is completely correct and will require no transferring of majors later, and that therefore only students who have made up their mind will apply to Cal Poly for that reason. These assumptions may be true for some people. Sophomore Shelby Dolliver says, "at first I didn't like the fact that Cal Poly made us declare our major. At other schools, I applied undeclared, but when I came to Cal Poly and was able to start off in my Child Development classes, I truly loved it and was really happy I came in as a Child Development major." Some students know exactly what they want to do when they come out of high school; in this case Cal Poly is the perfect school for them, so they can start out in their major classes immediately. For most other students though, this is not the case. [Editor's note: some individuals interviewed for this essay prefer to be quoted anonymously.]

For example, "Jane Doe" explains how she selected her major: "I just looked through a college handbook and it said that if you liked math and history you should be an economics major, so I am an economics major." She selected her major based on a short book description, not personal experience (her only experience in economics was a group project in high school). The fact is that both "Jane" and Shelby could be accommodated under an admissions system that lets determined students declare their major right away, but allows undecided students to arrive undeclared. There's no reason to force everyone to declare a major on the assumption that all have made up their mind on what they want to do with their lives at only age 18. Another factor compounding

this problem is that for students who do end up in majors they are not happy with, the process to switch is difficult.

Most students are aware of the hypothetical situation wherein a student hastily selected aerospace engineering thinking she would not go to Cal Poly, yet ended up attending and being stuck with hard classes she isn't interested in. The belief that incoming freshmen know what they want for the careers is very optimistic and sadly not the case in many instances. The concept of transferring majors is specifically designed to address issues like these, but countermeasures are increasingly difficult to deploy for students at Cal Poly. Starting as early as freshman orientation, the idea that it's hard or even impossible to switch majors is instilled in students' minds. These rumors are not untrue, and the experiences of many students who have gone through the laborious process testify to that.

Bridget McCrum, a second year business major at Cal Poly, has been trying to change her major for the past year. Bridget enrolled in an introductory business class her first quarter of Cal Poly and quickly discovered that she did not enjoy business and could not spend the next four years studying the subject.

"The first few weeks I tried to like the business class, but by the end of the quarter, I had come to the realization that it just wasn't for me. I decided to start the process of changing my major, but the thought was intimidating and I have been anxious ever since, not knowing if I've been accepted into my new choice of Construction Management or not," says Bridget.

The stress and complication to this process is apparently a new trend, however. "Jane Smith," a Cal Poly alumna, reflects: "Everyone that I know in the teaching/education program entered with a declared major, but we were told after we were accepted that we could change our declared major." Students today have a much harder time than "Jane."

The tricky part about changing majors is the arduous process students have to go through. Applying for a change of major is only possible if one's overall GPA is above 2.75 (for certain majors), and after a number of classes in the future major have been completed with high marks (Cal Poly CSC). This is obviously a problem for students who are bailing from their major due to low grades; the catch-22 is being stuck in a major until the GPA requirement is met, while often the major itself is cause for the low GPA. In addition, the requirement that classes be taken before acceptance into the major is problematic if that major is impacted. Bridget describes how she has "to take 4 classes for construction management and then be enrolled in another one before they department will even consider me. This would be okay if I could actually get into the classes, but instead every time I want to take a CM class, I have to email the professor and make sure that I can get a spot, which is extremely stressful and often times really difficult." Even when students are able to get into classes, there's no guarantee that two quarters down

the line the application to switch won't be denied and all of those credits will have been taken in vain.

The transfer process at Cal Poly places undue hardships on students who are trying to correct their early major decision, and students shouldn't and wouldn't be subjected to this process if they were allowed more time to explore their major in the first place. Transferring majors is costly both in time and financial hardships caused by loss of credits.

Changing majors at Cal Poly is a process that often takes time and extra work, which can delay the graduation dates for students creating problems such as financial implications and debts. The cost of attending Cal Poly for the 2009/2010 school year is estimated to be \$21,242, according to the Cal Poly Financial Aid website. This estimation is also set to increase for the 2010/2011 school year by a \$100 per quarter. Students are usually given three quarters to successfully change majors before either they must return to their original major or leave Poly. This process often sets back students by a minimum of one quarter, which can add an additional \$7,080 on their total college costs, and with tuition costs expected to continue rise, total college costs will only continue to rise as well.

Most students who attend college are paying their tuition and expenses via student loans. If students are required to attend another year of school, more and more of them are going to have to take out loans. This is supported by statistics from the U.S. Education Department, which states that for the 2008–2009 year, there was a 25% increase in federal student-loan disbursements from the previous year. This added borrowing of money adds to the already large debt of the average college graduate. According to a study done by National Center for Education Statistics, 50% of graduate students still have student loans, and the average loan debt is estimated to be \$23,000. Because more and more students are graduating with large sums of money owed, fewer of them are able to buy houses and start families (Chaker). This trend shows us that the change of majors process not only delays students from receiving their degrees, but can also set them back in life.

Transferring majors is a costly maneuver to retroactively cover up bad decisions made in the past, but what if those bad decisions could have been avoided? If Cal Poly were to allow students a longer discovery process before forcing them to declare, could these economically taxing corrective measures be avoided? Studies have shown that early major declaration does in fact result in a higher probability of that declaration being contrary to one's true interests.

If a student has correctly chosen a major that matches his interests and abilities, he will most likely start a career in his related field of study. What effects the timing of declaring a major has on the likelihood of switching to a career unrelated to one's field of study is an important indication on the quality of that timing decision.

In 2009, the National Bureau of Economic Research released a paper that analyzed what the differences in timing decisions for field specialization in college had on a student's long term career path. The findings were not surprising: students who specialized early in college, ie. chose their major quickly, were more likely to switch to an occupation unrelated to their field of study later in life than students who specialized later. The intuition behind these findings is that the more time students take to explore their strengths and interests before declaring a major, the better their decision will be to match with their long-term career choices.

The NBER is the leading organization for economics research in the US, and over half of American winners of the Nobel Prize in Economics have worked for them (nber.org). In order to determine the effects of the timing of major declaration on future career paths, the Bureau needed to perform statistical analysis on students who choose their majors early versus those who don't. The data for this was obtained for college graduates from the British and Scottish systems of higher education. In the British system, students are required to choose their field of study while still in high school. Once they are accepted to university, the classes they take are narrowly tailored to their major, and there is no leeway for experimentation or switching majors (NBER). England thus serves as an example of students who are required to specialize early for higher education. Scotland is the polar opposite, as students there are admitted to university as forcefully undeclared. Students are required to take a broad range of courses to explore their interests, and only after two years are allowed to declare their major (NBER). These two nations are perfect for the analysis in this study, because in one system students necessarily choose their majors early, while in the other necessarily late. Comparing England and Scotland is fair because students of both countries have similar job opportunities and life experiences under the common rule of the United Kingdom.

After creating a mathematical model on academic specialization, regression analysis was performed to search for a correlation between timing of specialization and likelihood of remaining in a related career. The paper found statistically significant results: "Across almost all specifications, the probability of a field switch is significantly lower for individuals with Scottish degrees than for their English counterparts". In other words, "individuals in the Scottish system, where specialization occurs relatively late, are less likely to switch to an unrelated occupation than their counterparts in England, who specialize early" (NBER). Because the statistical analysis was sound and consisted of random samples of students from several universities over the course of several years, as well as controls for "gender, marital status, age, high school GPA, and parental SES [job status]," the exogenous factors are neutralized and the data can be extrapolated to students beyond the UK (NBER).

The findings of the NBER provide strong evidence against Cal Poly's policy of forced early specialization. By only admitting students after they've declared a major (like England), there is a much higher chance that Poly students will be stuck in a major they don't like and end up with a career completely different from what they specialized in during school. Therefore, in order to better match students' major choice with their talents and interests, Cal Poly should allow students to be admitted undeclared and offer a period of exploration before having to make the monumental choice of what to do for the rest of their lives.

Cal Poly needs to recognize the fact that their current policy is detrimental to students' decision making abilities in light of this statistical analysis. The school could look to some of its peers for insight into how to change its own policy, and San Diego State University makes a good contender. SDSU is another CSU school with relatively similar population size and impacted like Cal Poly. At SDSU, students have the option of enrolling undeclared. "John Doe," a staff member at San Diego State University, explains that "SDSU believes that students do not know what they want at 17 or 18." The policy at San Diego State allows students more time for self-discovery without the pressure of being forced to declare majors right away. After their first semester, freshmen are able to declare their majors if they haven't already or switch majors if they feel they've made the wrong choice. SDSU has a more graduated approach than Cal Poly, which encourages students to pick their majors quickly while still affording them some time to make the decision. "We want students to declare quickly to see how it will impact course offerings as well as each student must have a major code to enroll in upper division major classes," explained "Doe" during a phone interview.

In light of economic analysis detailing the detriments of changing majors, personal testimonies about difficulties with the major policy, and statistical analysis proving that students who declare their majors early are more likely to declare contrary to their true interests, Cal Poly needs to rethink its admissions policy. Students need more time to explore their interests to find where their talents truly lie, and Cal Poly needs to accommodate this by allowing incoming freshmen to arrive undeclared for up to one year. If it were true that the current policy is so beneficial to students' graduation times and well being—as admissions officers claim—perhaps other universities in the country would adopt this plan. Cal Poly is a leading undergraduate university in California, and its students deserve the same opportunity to declare their major as anyone else in the state. Forcing freshmen to make such a life-impacting decision, without allowing for the proper time to ensure those decisions are well-informed, does a disservice to both the students and the community that counts on them being successful. ☺

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