

So You're Undecided?

That's great!

No, I really mean it. After more than 20 years here at Clarion, and some 30 years of involvement with higher education, I have come to believe that being undecided is *THE* way to start a college career. I think there are numerous reasons why this so, and I hope this brief note will explain the most important of them.

First, think of the diversity of majors available to you at Clarion. In the College of Arts and Sciences alone, there are more than 30 degree programs leading to a B.A. or a B.S. And something like 84"programs of study in the university as a whole. In addition, there are, numerous "minors"-abbreviated sequences of courses that can be taken in addition to a regular major. Of these, many are in fields to which few public schools provide even the briefest of introductions. How can you expect to know about all of the dozens of career opportunities each and every major offers if you've never been exposed to them? Your first year or two can be an opportunity to explore far beyond the subject-matter boundaries of high school.

Next, consider the fact that many of the jobs which you might seek on graduating will be created while you are in the university. The job market is turning over extraordinarily rapidly. Clarion cannot possibly anticipate all of the changes in the employment market which are taking place even as you proceed through your college career and therefore cannot be expected to provide job training for every possible career. But, if you will let us, we *CAN* give you a chance to develop the critical skills needed for success in virtually any career. Such skills as clear and effective writing, public speaking, critical and analytical reading, the ability to use a computer, basic mathematical reasoning and the ability to think rationally and critically---THESE will hold you in good stead in whatever field you might eventually enter. This is not to say that Clarion does not offer pre-professional training in numerous areas. In such applied areas as business, communication, education, clinical psychology, medical technology, and several more, Clarion does provide the specific skills to enter these professions. But what if you are a Philosophy major? Are you aware that philosophy majors typically out-score most other majors on both the GMAT exam and on the LSAT exam? Why? Because they can *read* carefully and can *think* analytically about what they have read. English majors are being recruited into businesses precisely because they can write well. A knowledge of a foreign language as well as the geography of the world can be extremely useful to individuals going into international business. The point is, in my opinion, the major may be of less importance than the fundamental skills that one can acquire while pursuing it, particularly when you think of career changes that one might make in a working lifetime.

Speaking of career changes, consider this: over 5 years ago, it was estimated that individuals entering the job market then would change careers **3** times and jobs **7** times in their working lifetimes. Though I haven't seen more recent data, I suspect the trend of career change is accelerating today and is probably going to continue into the foreseeable

future. Certainly, many employment commentators now tell would-be employees *NOT* to expect much in the way of job security in the future. Companies will be hiring individuals to solve specific problems and then will let them go. Increasingly, individuals are going to be independent contractors to other firms, and will not be on a single payroll for years at a time. In the face of this uncertainty, it is understandable that students will come to the university with certain anxiety about their futures, which often translates into the question "what jobs can I get with such and such a degree?" However, there is a certain short-sightedness in that question. One is the fact, mentioned above, that Clarion cannot possibly train you for jobs that will be created *WHILE* you're here. Another is that the changing nature of the job market is not entirely predictable (an understatement if there ever was one!). It becomes something of a crap-shoot picking at the beginning of a college career a professional field that may not be expanding by the time you enter it. ***BUT, and this is a critical point, the SKILLS will not become obsolete.*** There will always be a need for individuals who can write clearly, speak intelligently, read and comprehend complex material, and think with reason and care. Furthermore, if you have mastered the process of learning, you can keep abreast of new opportunities on your own. Shifting careers may not be a pleasant task, but it will always be a lot easier for those who have basic skills in abundance, and who are willing to learn whatever it takes to succeed in the new field.

A personal anecdote may illustrate another point I'd like to make about picking a career. Some time back, near the dark ages, while I was an undergraduate, I heard a story about an individual who was gifted in mathematics, and had excelled in this subject throughout public school and college, eventually getting a bachelors degree in mathematics. However, throughout college, there had been a strong drive to be of service to society. This desire to be useful lead them to choose graduate study in theology. After getting a Master's in Theology, they embarked upon a career as a minister. Alas, this proved to be a poor choice, for, in truth, the individual in the story was uncomfortable with people and frustrated by problems which had "messy" solutions at best. After a few years, they quit the ministry and returned to graduate school to take a doctorate in Psychology. This led to a position as a clinical psychologist. Unfortunately, this proved not much better than the ministry, for the problems were no less "messy." This second career choice proved unhappy for both psychologist and clients alike. The moral of the story, as it was given to me, is "do what you do best." The individual in the story would have made a fine mathematician, and this would have been the greatest gift to society. Failing to see that, they, ended up becoming a mediocre psychologist. There are enough mediocre "everythings" in the world--what is needed is excellent mathematicians—or philosophers, or sociologist, or music teachers, or what-have-you. Being undecided means you have an opportunity to find "what you do best,." or, as Joseph Campbell said it, to "follow your Bliss." Provided, of course, that you use this chance to fully explore your interests and the many, many choices that Clarion has to offer. The decision to explore is yours--the university can only make the opportunities available--we've built the structure, framed the doors and have left them unlocked and open--but *only you* can walk over the threshold.

"Excellence." You'll hear that word bandied about a lot. Unfortunately, it is becoming something of a slogan, and rather devoid of meaning to most who hear it. It doesn't have to be that way, however. I would suggest that you take the word as a challenge. Most of you have NO IDEA of how good you can be. You've not yet explored the limits of your talents and abilities. You can get through Clarion without doing that-"getting by" is entirely possible. On the other hand, you could consider these years as a chance to explore your limits, to find out just what your capabilities really are. Grades are not the only indicators, by the way, and excelling in sports is one way to test your limits. Remember, one of the Clarion wrestlers went on to win a gold medal at the Olympics! But there are other outlets too. Clarion has a national reputation in intercollegiate debate. The men's and women's swim teams are highly ranked. Many of our theatre majors have demonstrated enormous talent on the stage. It really doesn't matter in what arena you excel-what does matter is that you realize that you can be better, far better, than you are at the moment. The author George Leonard has written a number of inspiring books*, one of which is entitled "Mastery." In it, he argues that we all should find something at which we can become "masters;" In other words, something at which we excel-and then learn from that the self-discipline that can spread into all the rest of our lives. I would urge you to look into his book and see if it resonates with you-and then find that marvelous passion that propels one into exceeding one's own passions.

Some of you may ask, "What you say may be well and good for freshmen, but what of those of us who remain undecided into their sophomore and junior years?" Admittedly, as you advance into your college career, the pressure to pick a major increases--both from within the school, and often from parents as well. For some of you, the solution will be to make a tentative decision, picking a major that you do well in and, if not enjoy, at least tolerate well. Happiness may come once you are working within that field. Another solution is to do a Liberal Studies major--a rather eclectic, across-the-board liberal arts degree in which you have broad choice of courses. While not preparing you for a specific career, it can afford you the opportunity to develop basic skills which will be applicable to many careers. You might have a harder time selling yourself into that initial job, but as a generalist, you may subsequently be a better problem-solver than a highly specialized individual. In this choice, skills are important, so I recommend lots of writing and communicative skills. Alternatively, if the grades are good enough, the decision of specific concentration may be delayed until graduate school. A common example is the law, where many undergraduate degrees may serve as entrance requirements to law school--especially when there is a particular field of law to be entered. Many lawyers benefit from science degrees if their specialty is, say, environmental law. It is not unusual for people to change specializations from undergraduate to graduate school. In such a situation, there may be deficiencies which will need to be made up in the first year. However, keep in mind that graduate schools do require very good undergraduate grades--usually a minimum of 3.0 (out of a possible 4.0) or better in the major.

One of the individuals who may help you with your explorations is your advisor. Initially, you maybe assigned one, and the assignments are made to whichever faculty have expressed an interest in advising undecideds. Go to that advisor as soon as you get settled

on campus and introduce yourself. Make an effort to get to know this individual as a person--and not just as the one who signs your registration slip. Clarion is somewhat unusual in that students are allowed to pick their own advisors. So, should the assigned faculty-member not suit your needs, for whatever reason, find one who does! Once you've chosen a major, then you will want to find an advisor in that field. Believe me, an advisor is *necessary* if you hope to complete your major in the least time--they know the prerequisites and the schedules of advanced courses and should be able to insure your steady progress towards the degree. This is not to say that you have no responsibility in that area. Read the university catalog--it is, in effect, a contract between the institution and you, and the regulations and requirements of the catalog under which you enter a particular degree program will be those that you will have to meet to graduate. Once you have mastered the catalog & your obligations as well as those of the institution, your advisor can be of much greater assistance.

However, don't let the advisor be the only faculty or staff member you get to know. There are going to be lots of very fine and very dedicated individuals that you will come in contact with. If you will take the effort, you can meet many more than just those in classes or you contact through university activities. My advice? *Do it*. Make the effort. The most influential faculty member in my personal career was an amazing professor of Physics, who taught with some very unusual methods--methods he had developed. He called his methodology "eduction" rather than "education," taking it from the root word in Latin which means "to lead." Eventually, he was honored by the State University of New York for his pioneering experiments in education. But what I remember was the fact that he was an extraordinarily gentle and caring man with beautiful ideals concerning education. Several years following my graduation, when I was a temporary instructor at a college some 75 miles from my alma mater, I became frustrated by the internal politics and nasty, angry conflicts between members of the department to which I was attached. I became profoundly depressed and almost quit teaching.. But I called him one day, and he drove the 75 miles to the community in which I taught, had a long, conversation filled dinner with me, and restored my faith in the purpose of college teaching and reassured me that it could be a beautiful and wonderfully rewarding profession. In many ways, I owe him my professional life. I went back to my alma mater for my 20th year reunion—and made a point to stop and say thanks. *MY POINT?* You too could find a life-long exemplar here—so be willing to look.

Remember that your faculty are human beings too--full of the frailties as well as the strengths that we all have. There will be some you won't like, but they will be few; while the delightful ones can be quite numerous—if *you seek them out*; I really believe that your education will be impoverished if you don't take the friendship of at least one faculty member with you when you graduate.

I would be remiss if I didn't address yet another issue. It seems to me that too many students come to college concerned only with the choice of major, unaware that much more than just what they will do for a "career" is on the line. College is the place where most of you will complete the process of growing up. Very often, this is couched in the terminology of "finding out who you are." I think a more important question is "*WHO*

DO YOU WANT TO BE?" This is, for most of you, the last and least costly (emotionally, as well as financially) place for you to look at your weaknesses and overcome them. Here, more than any other single place in our society, you can explore the enormous varieties of lifestyles and cultures that exist in our country--and even those from many places in the world. Old beliefs and customs can be deeply questioned, reinforced or abandoned for new beliefs reached by thought, discussion and exploration of the vast stores of literature available here at Clarion. The resources are not merely the books in this library, but the tools that are available to connect with the great libraries of the world via interlibrary loan and, of course, the internet. And there are the personal contacts of friends and faculty who represent genuinely diverse viewpoints. From these, you can seek better ways of being, and adopt those that make personal sense to you. I do not mean to suggest that "anything goes." Quite the opposite. Here you have a chance to ask the greatest minds of all time, through the portals of the library, what they thought--and why. And then, choose, if you will, to incorporate this accumulated wisdom into your own life. In my own case, I went searching in a genre of literature called "epic fantasy" or sometimes, "sword and sorcery" literature. There I found a clear statement of the concept of personal honor and integrity that I needed for my own life. This existential search is a fundamental part of the growth process, and, though it sometimes involves a bit of pain, should be embraced as a great and useful part of a college education.

Finally, let me invite you to enjoy the process of exploration that lies before you. Learning can be a delightful experience all by itself--something to become absorbed in for hours at a time. "Surfing" the net has become an addiction for many, who tell me that they never knew there was "so much out there." In truth, it doesn't take a computer to discover that--only a willingness to look on your own--to open your eyes and mind to the enormous possibilities. I used to scan the books in the library, wandering the shelves, picking titles almost at random, and finding interesting books full of new ideas on almost every shelf of every row of every room of every floor. And I loved it--I still do. I cannot learn enough. This may be an addiction--but it is a very positive one. Onerous routine or ecstatic adventure--college can be either of these; the choice is very much yours. I urge you to search for the ecstasy. On this search, I wish you all the very best.

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P.S. If you decide to come here an undecided student, feel free to look me up. I'll be happy to be of assistance. Since I tend to *live* on the third floor of Peirce Hall, feel free to stop by my office—Room 123 (and be prepared to dodge falling debris & books; I'm not so neat!)- or give me a call at #2577. I also spend a lot of time in the local coffee house—my home-away-from-home & sanctuary. You are welcome to stop and say hi there too.

*Leonard has written quite a few books. "Mastery" is only one. I also recommend "The Ultimate Athlete" and "The Way of Aikido: Life Lessons from an American Sensei." I've had the good fortune to meet the author and can testify that he is truly one of the most amazing men I ever met.