

Introduction to University: Lecture Six

Choosing a Program at a University

Mark Mercer
Professor of Philosophy
Saint Mary's University
Halifax, NS B3H 3C3
sergechestnut@gmail.ca

You are a student currently in a classroom. As such, you should *not* be thinking about the future. Your focus should be on the here-and-now. Your current occupation is university student, and you should be concerned almost exclusively to enjoy your studies. Students enjoy themselves as students by attempting to meet the standards of excellence within liberal study.

You probably have three, four or more reasons for being a university student. One of those reasons, I hope, is that you enjoy engaging intellectually with the subject matters of your courses. If you are not thrilled to study things purely for the sake of studying them, likely enough you are unhappy at university, and it must feel to you that you are doing nothing here but paying dues.

Whatever you do, do not let your other concerns (or the failures of your university to support your academic engagement well) come between you and the practice of thinking hard about interesting matters.

That said, we'd be foolish not to acknowledge that one of your (other) reasons for being a university student is that you want eventually to have a satisfying job or career. Since some choices you make today will be significant for your future, maybe it's all right for you to turn your thoughts just briefly to the future before returning to your central preoccupation, which is enjoying a university student's pursuit of excellence in study.

Psychologists tell us that meaningful work is important to one's happiness and sense of satisfaction with one's life. Meaningful work is work well suited to one's temperament, tastes and talents, is work that one perceives as significant to others or to society, and is work that provides one with challenges and with opportunities to exercise one's skills.

In thinking right now about your future, you should be thinking, in very general terms, about what sort of work would be meaningful for you. You want to make choices in university that help you eventually to settle into meaningful work.

But keep in mind that no choice that you make during your university years is irrevocable. The worst that can happen if some choice turns out to be wrong is that you're set back a year in your plans. That's no big deal (in the overall scheme of things, that is). So don't worry.

Once you attain your bachelor's degree (and maybe after a year of travelling or teaching English as a second language in Japan), you will either be trying to get a job or seeking further education or training. Further education or training includes:

- Academic graduate school
- Vocational graduate school
- Professional school
- College or polytechnic school
- Trade or vocational school
- Apprenticeship

Academic graduate school is advanced liberal study in humanities, sciences, engineering, or social sciences. After you get your BA in humanities or social sciences, you begin study for your Master of Arts, your MA. After you get your BSc in science, you begin study for your MSc, your Master of Science. Then you will either get a job, or continue your education toward your Ph.D., or enrol in a professional school, in college, or in a trade or vocational school.

The goal of academic graduate programs is simply study for the sake of study, which is, of course, the same goal as the academic undergraduate program in which you are currently enrolled.

Vocational graduate school is study or training in some field fairly closely connected to work or a profession. Such schools include schools of library science, business administration, applied or clinical psychology, women and gender studies, applied science, international development studies, and policy analysis. A vocational graduate program *can* be pursued in the spirit of liberal study (more or less), but the courses and the requirements are designed with an eye to what employers (particularly government and organizations) are looking for.

Professional schools are schools in professions such as law, medicine, dentistry, veterinary medicine, engineering, nursing, business, journalism, and accounting. (There's no firm distinction between vocational graduate schools and professional schools.)

At *colleges or trade or polytechnic schools* you can acquire the skills required to be a schoolteacher, a nurse, a carpenter, a welder, a film maker, a dental hygienist, a paramedic, a plumber, a recording engineer, a business manager, a secretary.... ("Vocational education" is training that prepares people to be artisans, tradespeople or technicians.)

Saint Mary's University, like many universities, offers three types of Bachelor of Arts degree.

- BA General (Double Concentration), a three-year program
- BA Major, a four-year program
- BA Honours, a four-year program

A *BA General* requires 90 credit hours, with 24 credit hours in each of two concentration disciplines (history, English, classics, political science, whatever).

A one-semester course is worth three credit hours. A student will typically take five courses per semester, for fifteen credit hours in total. Three years at thirty credit hours a year adds up to ninety credit hours. Of course, a student might take only four or even three or fewer courses a semester, and thereby earn a ninety credit-hour degree in four or more years. One should find a comfortable pace, a pace that enables one to discharge family or job duties easily while also in a university program.

A *BA Major* requires 120 credit hours, with 36 or more credit hours in the student's major discipline. A double-major requires 36 credit hours in each of two disciplines. Students should declare their major in their second year—before Christmas, if they can, certainly during Winter semester. (You can always change your mind and switch majors.)

A *BA Honours* requires 120 credit hours, with 60 in the student's major discipline. A student must have a grade point average of at least 3.0 to earn an Honours degree. Students who are majoring in a discipline and wish to enter the Honours program should apply to the program late in second year or early in third year, once they have a good sense of what the discipline is all about.

On what grounds should you choose among these three programs? You should, of course, choose your areas of concentration (three-year degree) or your major (four-year degrees) on grounds of interest. Study what most interests you, not what you think will impress prospective employers. But on what grounds should you decide to major in history (say), rather than either do a honours degree in history or take history as one of your areas of concentration in a three-year degree?

You should choose among the three programs by considering what options each program opens up for you and which options it closes, especially with regard to future education or training and a future paying job.

Only a BA-with-Honours degree makes you directly a candidate for academic graduate school. It is possible to be accepted to a graduate school with a BA Majors, but you might be required to complete a qualifying year before officially beginning your graduate studies. If you think you might continue your liberal studies at an academic graduate school, you are well advised to graduate with an Honours degree. With a BA Honours degree, all your options are open.

An aside: The term “honours” in the context *BA (Honours)* does not mean that you have done well or attained an honour. It simply indicates that you are very well schooled in a particular discipline or field. “Honours” is not an honorific. Universities do bestow honours on students, particularly at graduation, when the achievements of some graduates are accorded *cum laude* (with distinction), *magna cum laude* (with great distinction), or *summa cum laude* (with greatest distinction). Do not confuse an honours degree with honours in one's degree.

With a BA Major degree you are eligible for professional school as well as for college and for trade and vocational school. Professional schools usually have their own entrance examinations, making an Honours degree unnecessary.

With a BA General you are eligible for some professional schools as well as for college and for trade and vocational school.

The *Academic Calendar, Undergraduate Programs* gives more information on the three different Bachelor of Arts degrees available at Saint Mary's.

Basically, the BA Honours gives you the most options for your future and the BA General the fewest, but the BA Honours takes four years and requires you to work to higher standards. It also forces you to concentrate on a single area, and that might come at the cost of breadth in your education and a stifling of your interests. The BA Major, for its part, prepares you for all options except, perhaps, the advanced academic study undertaken in graduate school.

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