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Which Major Best Prepares You for Post-Grad Life?

Paul A. Djupe

April 22, 2021

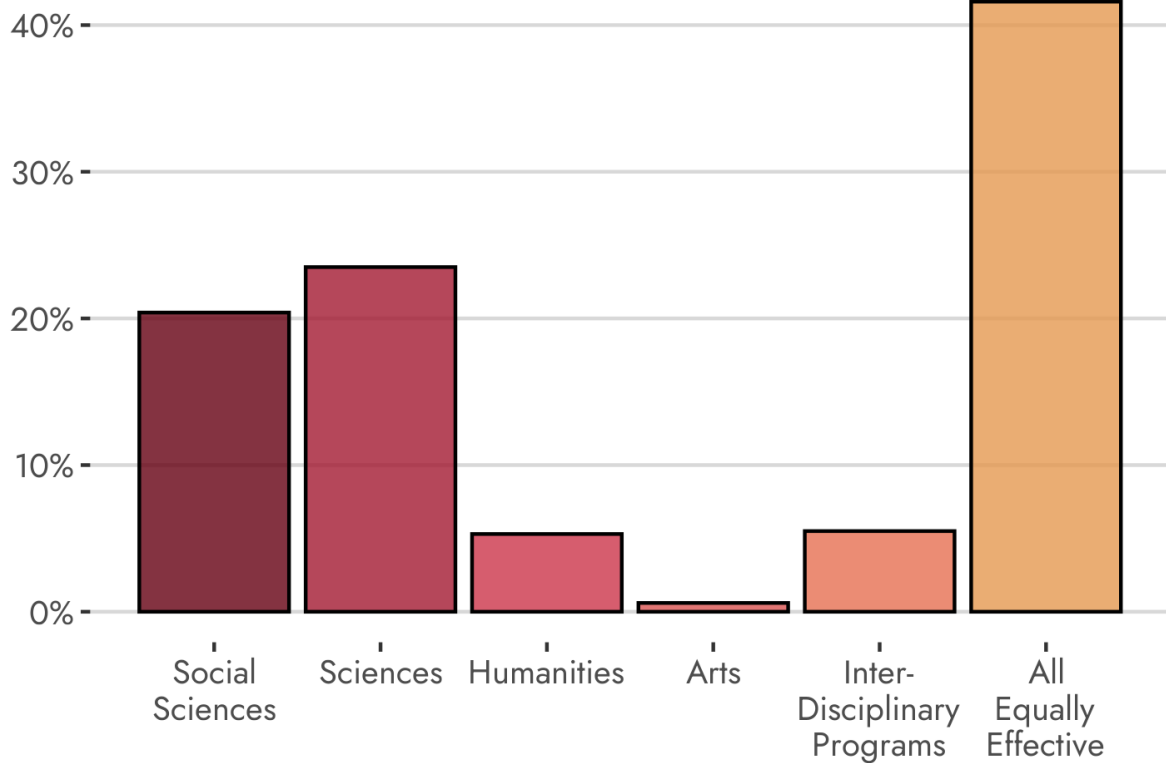
By Paul A. Djupe

Choosing a major is often billed as one of the most consequential decisions you'll make, perhaps in life. It's a question students ask each other, and is definitely one of those gauntlet questions you have to run with your parents and relatives. It's also a question you tend to revisit – the average student changes majors once. We tend to think that your major drives what kind of job you get, what skills you have, how much money you make, etc. There's even evidence that picking a major is crucial to community engagement and self-identity. Are Denison students partisans about their majors?

When Oliver Gladfelter first looked at which majors are the most pretentious, it is probably no surprise that scientists and artists stood out in believing that others couldn't handle their majors. They are, after all, the most skill-driven enterprises. Do they think that their majors best prepare students for post-grad life? To find out, we asked this question a month ago in March 2021 to just under 500 Denisonians.

The plurality of students (42%) believe that all majors prepare students equally well for post-grad life. Over a fifth each chose science or social science majors and many fewer picked any of the other divisions of the college (arts, humanities, interdisciplinary programs). But maybe this distribution is caused by the number of majors – are students just picking their own?

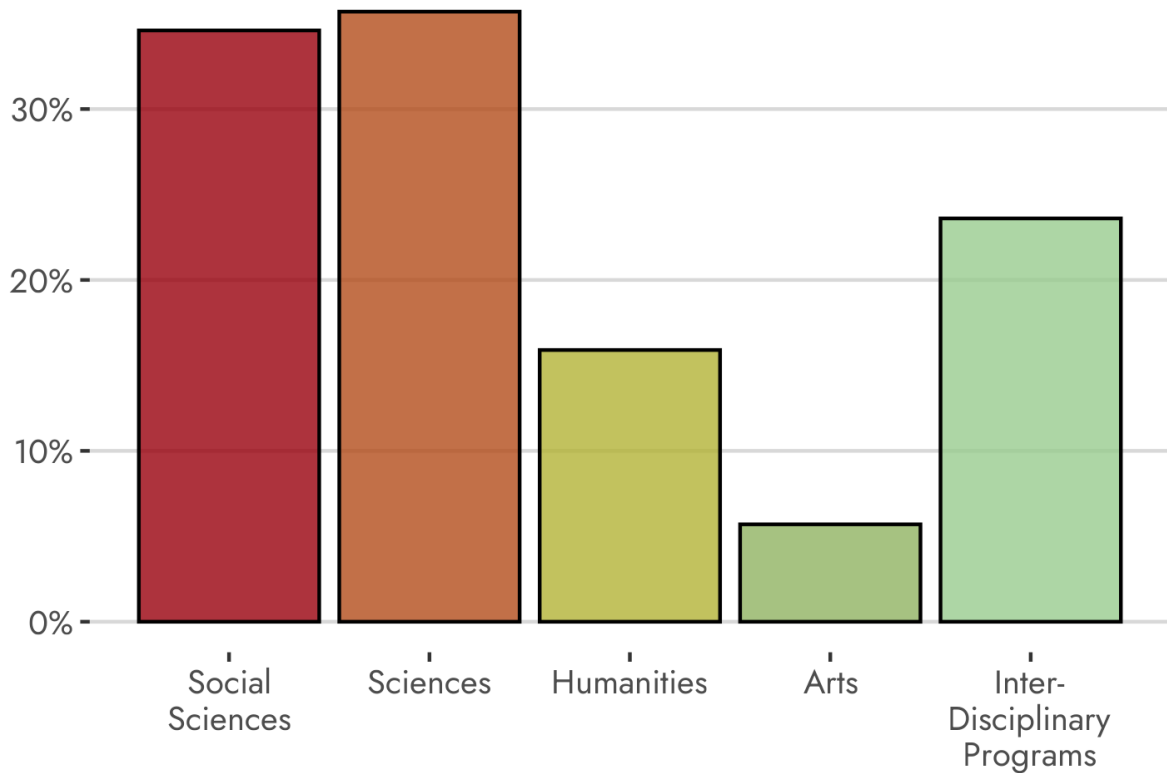
Which major best prepares you for post-grad life?



Source: March 2021 Survey.

Well, not really. Shown in the figure below are the percentages of each major divisional that said their own division was the best prep. So, 33 percent of social science majors said that the social sciences were the best prep. They fall just behind scientists, while each of the other divisions are even less sectarian. That is, only rather small numbers of Denisonians are partisans for their own major.

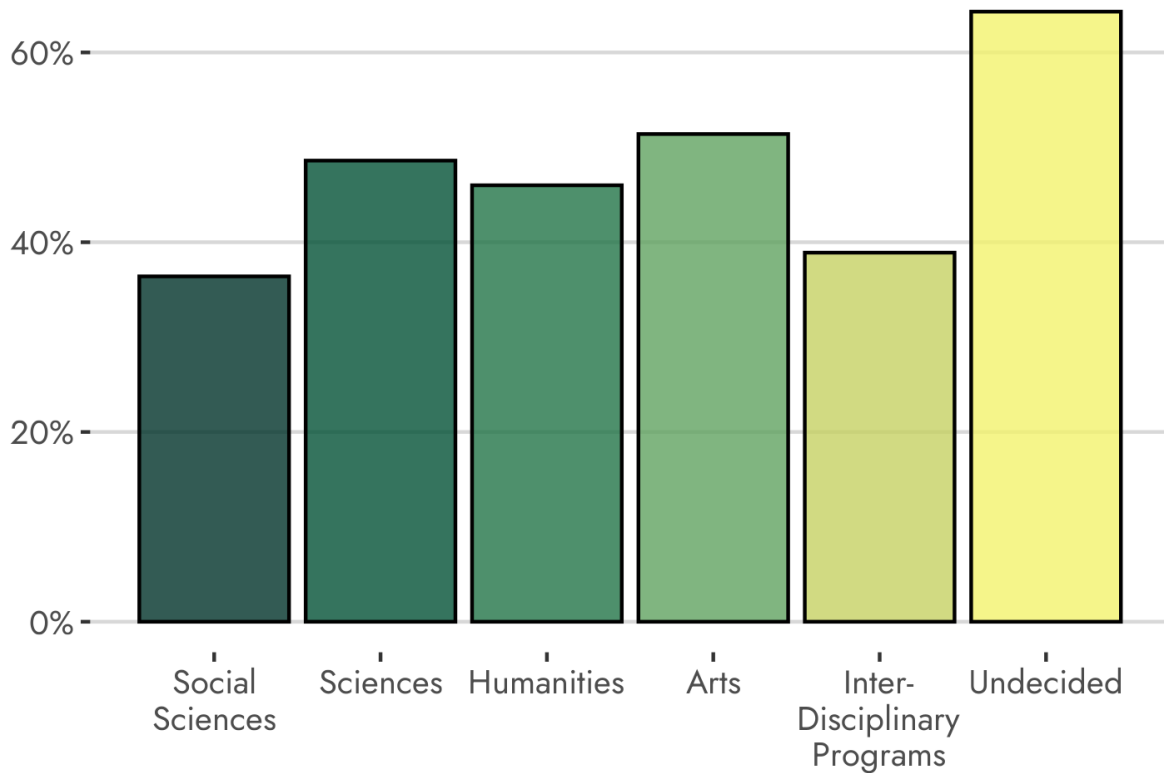
My major is the best preparation



Source: March 2021 Survey.

Which isn't to say that students all embrace the liberal arts as the best prep for life beyond The Hill. Only a majority of the Undecideds think that all majors are equally helpful, but the rest come quite close. The lowest are social scientists and interdisciplinary majors – only just above a third are ecumenical about the preparation provided from all majors.

They Are All Equally Effective, by Major



Source: March 2021 Survey.

I was curious if other factors were driving these patterns and found little. There are no differences by GPA – students apparently are not reasoning that their success means they are better prepared. There are no differences by class year – students do not get more or less certain about their prep over time. The only evidence I found drew on sex: men are more sectarian than women (by just over 10%). There are lots of possible explanations for that, such as their major because women are less likely to be social science or science majors, but also because men tend to score higher in social dominance orientation, which means attaching normative significance to the social order.

This will come as a surprise to few, but Denison is a liberal arts college, where the educational ideology is that a Denison education best prepares you for post-grad life, regardless of major. Unless you have highly specific job goals or specific education targets (e.g., if you want to be a chemistry PhD, you ought to be a chemistry major in undergrad), taking classes that help you communicate better and think more flexibly, deeply, ethically, and critically should be the desired end result. Happily, that is what happens for the serious student no matter the path taken through the curriculum. Of course, we will still have sectarian students and faculty among us, but the structure of the curriculum, in which your major is only $\sim\frac{1}{3}$ of your coursework, dictates a diverse and vibrant undergraduate course of study.

Paul A. Djupe is a local cyclist who coincidentally has taught social science research methods and political science at Denison for millenia. He started onetwentyseven.blog a few years ago in a bid to subsidize collective action. He's on Twitter and you should be too, along with your president.