

Do Not Double-Major

Having two college majors has become a fad. It's not a good one.



By David Leonhardt

Opinion Columnist

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When I visit a college campus and ask the students what they're studying, the response often starts with: "I'm double-majoring in ..." And then my heart sinks just a little bit.

I understand why many students are tempted to double-major. They have more than one academic interest. When I was in college, I briefly thought about double-majoring in my two favorite subjects, math and history. (Instead, I spent much of my time at the college newspaper and barely completed one major — applied math.)

But the reality is that many students who double-major aren't doing it out of intellectual curiosity. The number of double majors has soared in recent years mostly because students see it as a way to add one more credential to their résumé. What's even better than one major? Two majors!

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Except that it's not. Most students would learn more by creatively mastering a single major — and leaving themselves time to take classes in multiple other fields.

“Double majoring,” as Jacqueline Sanchez, a Wellesley College student, wrote in a recent op-ed for her campus paper, “ultimately prevents students from exploring many different disciplines.”

Unfortunately, double majoring is just one part of a credentials arms race among teenagers and college students. This arms race exacerbates inequality, because it can make upper-middle-class students seem more accomplished than working-class and poor students. And the arms race is also unpleasant and counterproductive for many of the well-off students. They're loading up on extracurricular activities, Advanced Placement courses and college majors, rather than exploring, going deep into one or two areas and learning what they really enjoy.

Yesterday afternoon in Dallas, David Coleman — the president of the College Board, which administers the SAT, A.P.'s and other tests — gave a speech in which he took on the credentials arms race. I want to turn the rest of today's newsletter over to an excerpt from that speech:

“We should also reframe extracurricular activities. Applications for college have as many as 10 spaces for students to fill out with activities outside of class. How about three? Let's say to students: ‘Share 1 to 3 things you are devoted to outside your classwork. If you want to do more than three things outside of class, that's great, but not to get into college.’

“The College Board needs to say a similar thing about taking A.P. courses. We have data that taking up to five A.P. courses over the course of high school helps students complete college on time. But there is no evidence that excessively cramming your

schedule with A.P. classes advances you. Let us say to students, ‘If you would like to take more than 5 A.P. courses because you love the class, do so, but not to get into college.’

“We all need to be careful when we say to students take as many rigorous courses as possible. May I say instead, please don’t. Take the time to focus and do a few things well — and enjoy the golden time of high school.

“It is better for all students to make the path to college simpler and shorter. When applying to college becomes an endless list, it hurts low income students most.”

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David Leonhardt is a former Washington bureau chief for the Times, and was the founding editor of The Upshot and head of The 2020 Project, on the future of the Times newsroom. He won the 2011 Pulitzer Prize for commentary, for columns on the financial crisis.

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