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Life's Biggest Decisions

CAREER

Which University Degree Should I Pursue?

The degree you pursue is more important than the university where you pursue it.

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Reviewed by Michelle Quirk



KEY POINTS

- Choosing a university degree involves weighing interests against job prospects and financial stability.
- Degrees in science, technology, engineering, mathematics, health, and business may lead to higher earnings.
- Career success often involves nonlinear paths and developing your passion over time.

Deciding what university degree to pursue is a major life decision that can shape your career and personal development. It's a question that prompts deep introspection, weighing interests against practical considerations like job prospects and financial stability. To illustrate how this decision can evolve and impact one's life, let's look at the journey of Susan Wojcicki, the CEO of YouTube between 2014 and 2023.



Source: Created by Microsoft's Copilot Image Creator

Susan Wojcicki was born and raised in California. Wojcicki excelled academically and displayed a keen interest in writing, contributing to her high school newspaper, *The Oracle*. Based on her excellent grades, she was invited to attend Harvard University in 1986. However, like many young students, she faced uncertainty about which degree to pursue. She ultimately chose to major in history and literature, which was a program that nurtured her skills in writing and research and aligned strongly with her interests at the time.

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During her time at Harvard, Wojcicki's academic interests expanded. She took an economics course that piqued her curiosity and planted the seed for a possible career in economics. However, it wasn't until her senior year that another interest emerged in computer science. As you can guess, this newfound interest would later significantly impact her career trajectory.

After graduating in 1990 with honors, Wojcicki moved to Silicon Valley and continued her education. She earned a Master of Science in Economics from the University of California, Santa Cruz, in 1993, followed by an MBA from UCLA Anderson School of Management in 1998. Throughout this period, she gained valuable experience working in marketing and consulting roles at various companies.

In a twist of fate, Wojcicki rented her Menlo Park garage to two young computer scientists, Larry Page and Sergey Brin, who were working on their new startup, Google. Faced with a critical decision, Wojcicki chose to join Google in 1999 as their 16th employee rather than pursue a Ph.D. in economics. This decision set her on a path to becoming one of *Time's* 2015 **100 most influential people**.

tional and career landscape. When it comes to choosing a degree, two main factors stand out: interest and job prospects.

Following Your Interests

The advice to “follow your passion” is common, and for good reason. Studies show that students who choose their major based on intrinsic interests tend to **perform better academically and feel more satisfied** with their educational experience. For instance, **a study** involving more than 20,000 students from six large U.S. public universities found that those who chose their majors based on intrinsic reasons, such as a genuine interest in the subject, were more likely to be satisfied and feel a sense of belonging.

THE BASICS

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It's important to consider whether there's a good fit between your interests and your chosen field. According to John Holland, a prominent figure in vocational choice theory, people flourish when there's a match between their personality type and their environment. Holland identified **six personality types** each aligning with different activities, values, and competencies:

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- **Realistic:** Prefers using tools and machines. Values material rewards. Excels at manual, mechanical, and technical activities.
- **Investigative:** Prefers thinking about phenomena. Values knowledge. Excels at scientific and mathematical activities.
- **Artistic:** Prefers creating new things. Values creativity. Excels at language, art, music, drama, and writing.
- **Social:** Prefers helping others. Values service. Excels at human relations.
- **Enterprising:** Prefers persuading others. Values status. Excels at leadership.
- **Conventional:** Prefers systematic organization of data. Values financial accomplishment. Excels at clerical and computational activities.

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This match between personality type and occupation type turns out to be really important. Students are **more likely to**



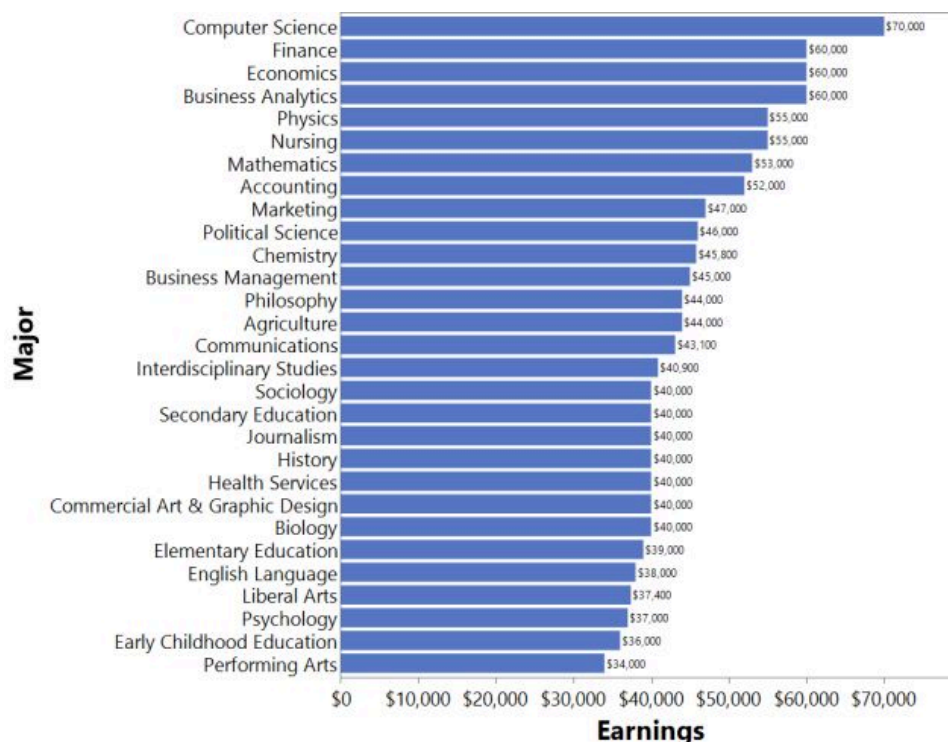
Source: Adrian Camilleri

Considering Job Prospects

While following your interests is crucial, it's equally important to consider the practical aspects of your degree choice. Earnings potential, job security, and career growth are significant factors. Generally, degrees in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), health, and business fields tend to **offer higher starting salaries** and better long-term financial prospects compared to degrees in the arts, humanities, and social sciences.

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Although everyone's income usually increases over time, the differences also increase. For example, during their prime earning years, on average, those with degrees in STEM, health, and business earn close to **42 percent more** income than those with degrees in teaching, arts, liberal arts, and humanities. According to an **analysis in 2014**, over the course of a lifetime, the expected earnings for a student enrolling in a U.S.-based arts or humanities undergraduate degree program is around 2.2 million dollars compared to 3.0 million dollars for a student enrolling in a business or STEM major.



More than one-third of those who earn a university degree go on to further study, which can be a smart financial move. Once again, graduate degrees in engineering, science, and business are most likely to boost earnings. For example, Wojcicki's combination of a humanities undergraduate degree with postgraduate degrees in economics and business provided her with a diverse skill set that was highly valued in the tech industry. This blend of education and experience positioned her well to seize opportunities as they arose.

Take-Homes

There are a few important take-homes from this analysis. First, choosing a university degree is a significant decision that involves balancing your interests with practical considerations about your future career and financial security. Before choosing a major, you should honestly reflect on your preferred activities, values, and competencies and then reflect on which degrees will provide you with a good fit.

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earnings compared to arts and humanities degrees. Of course, the potential for high earnings exists in all fields for those who excel and leverage their skills effectively. It's more lucrative to be a top-rate teacher than a bottom-rate engineer.

Third, the path to career success and happiness is often non-linear. Opportunities can arise in unexpected ways. It's important to remember that passions and interests **evolve over time**. What fascinates you at 17 might not hold the same appeal at 27 or 37. Additionally, the idea of a single, preordained passion can be limiting. It can be more helpful to think of **passion as something you can develop and cultivate** through your experiences and education.

If you'd like to see how your own big decisions compare to those of others, complete the survey [here](#) and also check out the data.

References

Susan Wojcicki. *Forbes*.

Brian Grazer. Susan Wojcicki. *Time*. April 16, 2015.

K. Schaeffer. 10 facts about today's college graduates. Pew Research. April 12, 2022.



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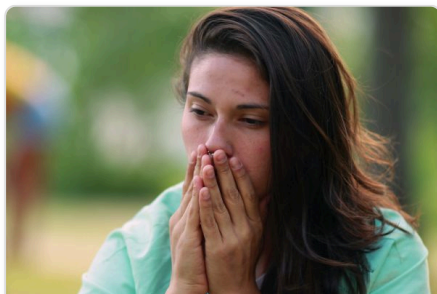


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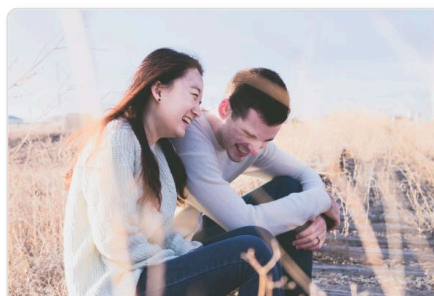


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