

# Majoring in Education

The United States Department of Education reports that education is one of the most frequently awarded college degrees in the nation. In recent time, close to 106,000 education majors have graduated from college each year. This may not seem surprising in a country with such a large population; the sheer number of children all but guarantees that the American education system is one of the nation's major employers, especially when day care, private and parochial schools, and other special programs are factored in along with the public schools. In fact, it is estimated that there are currently some 54,000,000 students enrolled in grades K-12, and approximately 3,400,000 teachers instructing them. What may be surprising is the number of liberal arts colleges and universities that do not offer education as an undergraduate major.

What sets the education major apart from other college majors such as English or mathematics is that it is connected to a professional field that is subject to state licensing and oversight. Although the requirements for a permanent teaching license vary from state to state, there are some commonalities, including the eventual completion of a master's degree in education. Some universities with graduate programs in education may choose not to offer an undergraduate major in the same field because many of the same courses constitute the master's program.

Still other colleges offer an education *minor* rather than a major, giving students the opportunity to explore the field a bit before deciding

whether to commit to a graduate program. This also may give students an advantage when applying to graduate schools and when looking for jobs because their transcripts will reflect an early interest in education as well as in the subject they choose as their major. An education minor may actually involve more course work and credit than other minors because student teaching and other fieldwork add to the load.

A common theme in the literature provided by education programs of all sorts—major, minor, and graduate—is the almost sacred responsibility of teachers to the lives of other people’s children and thus to the future of the nation. The nation’s schools are charged with so many tasks, from integrating the children of immigrants to ensuring a competitive workforce, that teachers are forced to bring many different skills to their jobs. In addition to knowing the subjects they teach and the strategies for teaching children of a particular age, teachers are also called upon to teach everything from ethics and manners to hygiene and good nutrition. For this reason, education programs usually require interdisciplinary knowledge from a variety of related fields, as described in the following section.

## Requirements

Most undergraduate education departments require students to begin with an *introductory course*, designed to provide an overview of the history and development of education in the United States, major theorists and their ideas, and the general methodology used.

*Education courses* are those offered directly by the college’s education department and deal with educational issues, ranging from the very general to the very specific. General courses often have titles like “Foundations of Education,” “The Culture of Teaching,” or “Contemporary Issues in Education.” More specific courses deal with curriculum development and techniques for teaching various subject areas and age groups (generally early childhood, elementary, and secondary or adolescent). Specialized courses concern the teaching of certain populations of students who differ from the mainstream, including minorities, the disabled, and those who do not yet speak English. Finally, colleges with a particular cultural or regional interest

may offer courses on teaching related to that interest, such as teaching in religious or urban settings.

*Related courses from outside the education program* are courses offered by other departments but still critical for the development of a good educator:

- ◆ **Psychology courses** include developmental psychology or child development, the psychology of learning, and abnormal psychology. These courses provide an understanding of how students learn, enabling teachers to tailor their lessons to the type of students they will be working with. At colleges that offer an education minor rather than a major, students may choose to major in psychology to enhance their understanding of their students' mental processes.
- ◆ **Social science courses** include minority and ethnic studies, such as Latino, African American, Asian, and Native American studies. These courses provide an understanding of the many cultural and ethnic groups future teachers may encounter in their classes, particularly in large, multi-ethnic schools. In a related vein, many colleges require education students to take at least one course on cultural understanding and the avoidance of prejudice and discrimination. At colleges that offer an education minor rather than a major, students may opt to major in religious, ethnic, or women's studies so that they will be prepared to teach those populations.
- ◆ **Sociology courses** include courses on schools and classrooms as social environments, family dynamics and their role in student achievement, and the relationships between schools and communities. These courses provide an understanding of how schools are viewed by the many parties involved, including teachers, parents, political and community leaders, and students, and how these views affect the outcome of educational programs.
- ◆ **History courses** include the history of American education, patterns of migration and/or immigration in the United States, and specific eras of history, such as the Colonial period or the Cold War, as related to education. These courses provide an understanding

of the role of education in American society, from the one-room schoolhouse to the “Americanization” of immigrants to the fight against Communism and the related focus on science education.

- ◆ **Health courses** include first aid, safety, and nutrition courses. These courses prepare teachers to assume responsibility for the physical safety and well-being of their students, especially in early childhood and elementary school settings, where teachers must supervise playtime, lunchtime, and snack time in addition to lessons.
- ◆ **Economics courses** include courses related to financing the educational system, from large city districts to individual classrooms. These courses provide an understanding of how economic policies affect school reform, technology, and teacher salaries, as well as such controversial issues as school choice and testing.
- ◆ **Philosophy courses** include courses on classical thinkers, such as Socrates and Plato, and on entire schools of thought and how they view the relationship between teachers, students, and society. These courses provide an understanding of how the role of education has been viewed throughout history.
- ◆ **Political science courses** include courses on various political and economic systems and the role of education in each. These courses provide an understanding of how education has been used to indoctrinate citizens and prepare them to fill needed positions in society.
- ◆ **Courses on subjects that may be taught in schools** are on those subjects that a teacher may specialize in teaching, such as English, math, history, the sciences, and foreign languages, among others. Students planning to teach in elementary schools may have to take a variety of these subjects, as many subjects are taught in one elementary classroom. Those who plan to teach at the secondary level may pursue more advanced courses in just one of these disciplines. In fact, those colleges that offer an education minor in lieu of the major may require the student to major in the subject(s) that he or she plans to teach.

- ◆ **Student teaching and fieldwork** provide academic credit for supervised, hands-on experience. Student teaching is required for state certification, and involves several hours a week assisting an experienced teacher in an appropriate classroom setting. The student teacher may work with small groups of children, prepare and teach certain lessons, and learn from the actions of the supervising (or cooperating) teacher. An accompanying weekly seminar or meeting with an advising professor in the education department allows the student teacher to discuss these experiences, ask questions about them, and put them into context.

Other fieldwork may include classroom observations with specific goals. In some cases, the goal may be to observe how a particular subject is taught. In other cases, it may be to follow a certain program or technique being tried in a classroom. Still other observations may involve following a particular student, especially one with special needs or who represents a certain demographic. Again, a related seminar allows students to share their observations and report on them.

### Statistics on Education Degrees\*

	<i>Associate's Degrees (2-year colleges)</i>	<i>Bachelor's Degrees (4-year colleges)</i>	<i>Master's Degrees</i>	<i>Doctoral Degrees</i>	<i>All Degrees</i>
<b>Public Colleges and Universities</b>	7,853	75,786	72,719	4,785	161,143
<b>Private Colleges and Universities</b>	1,366	29,780	56,347	1,931	89,424
<b>All Colleges and Universities</b>	9,219	105,566	129,066	6,716	250,567

\* National Center for Educational Statistics, 2002

### Typical Requirements for Education Majors

<b>Requirement</b>	<b>Purpose of Requirement</b>	<b>When the Requirement Is Fulfilled</b>	<b>Typical Choices</b>
Introductory course	To provide an overview of the field; a prerequisite for all other education courses	Freshman or sophomore year	Foundations of education, exploring education, the culture of teaching, contemporary issues in education, introduction to early childhood/primary/secondary education, introduction to special education
Education department courses	To develop relevant skills and knowledge of disciplines in education	Throughout the college years	<p><i>Skills:</i> Curriculum development, observation and assessment of students, measurement and evaluation, classroom management and discipline, special education, deaf education, education of the gifted</p> <p><i>Disciplines:</i> Literacy, the teaching of elementary school reading and language arts, the teaching of elementary school math, the teaching of elementary school science, the teaching of elementary school social studies, the teaching of secondary school English, the teaching of secondary school math, physical education, the teaching of secondary school biology/chemistry/physics/computers, the teaching of secondary school history, the teaching of secondary school foreign languages, the teaching of English as a second language, art education, music education</p>

Related courses from other departments	To develop interdisciplinary knowledge and an understanding of other issues affecting education	Throughout the college years	Developmental psychology, child psychology, human learning and memory, abnormal psychology  Urban studies, Latino studies, African American studies, Asian studies, women's studies  Discrimination in American culture, cultural sensitivity, prejudice in the workplace  Family dynamics, the culture of the schoolhouse, community development and growth  History of American education, immigration and assimilation in the United States, the Cold War and American culture, the Industrial Revolution  Child safety, nutrition, urban health  School finance, state and city budgets  The Socratic method, Western thought, the ideal of the Greek citizen, Eastern philosophies  Totalitarian societies, the individual and the socialist system, capitalism and socioeconomic struggle

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### Typical Requirements for Education Majors (continued)

<b>Requirement</b>	<b>Purpose of Requirement</b>	<b>When the Requirement Is Fulfilled</b>	<b>Typical Choices</b>
Courses on subjects to be taught	To develop expertise in a particular discipline	Throughout the college years	<p><i>English:</i> Medieval literature, the American novel, poetry, Shakespeare</p> <p><i>Math:</i> Calculus, non-Euclidean geometry</p> <p><i>Science:</i> Biology, chemistry, computer science, physics</p> <p><i>History:</i> Ancient civilizations, the Renaissance, European history, Colonial America, World War II, the Cold War</p> <p><i>Foreign languages:</i> French, Italian, Japanese, Spanish, Russian, and so on: beginning through advanced levels, the literature of, and so on</p>
Student teaching, fieldwork, and practica	To gain hands-on experience and observations	Junior or senior year	Supervised student teaching, observation of the Montessori method, senior practicum in elementary education
Not-for-credit workshops and training	To develop preparedness for emergency situations	Junior or senior year	Child abuse awareness, cardio-pulmonary resuscitation, first aid, fire department safety, and evacuation training

Finally, in light of the increasing awareness of child abuse and neglect, teachers-in-training are now required by many states to participate in workshops or seminars on recognizing and reporting such incidents. These sessions may be brief and thus may not accrue any academic credits, but because they are required for certification, many college education programs offer them on campus.

## Skills Required to Succeed with the Education Major

For many years, education was considered a good profession for women because it required skills that were considered to be natural female characteristics, including patience and a nurturing instinct. Although this kind of thinking is now largely dismissed as stereotyping, the fact remains that there are certain skills and traits—regardless of gender—that are helpful for education majors to have, even for those people who go on to less conventional jobs.

- ◆ **Organizational skills** are helpful for any college student, but particularly for education majors, who must not only keep track of their own assignments, but also of the work they assign to numerous pupils in their student teaching placements. The ability to stay organized is a big advantage in juggling all the responsibilities, people, and tasks involved in education.
- ◆ **Detail orientation** is an invaluable skill for similar reasons. Education majors are taught to design curricula, teach and assess students, and record all kinds of information, and having a good eye for detail makes it easier to keep up with all these tasks.
- ◆ **Public speaking skills** help education majors communicate effectively. These skills include speaking at the right volume so that everyone can hear, enunciating clearly so that the words are understood, and using appropriate vocabulary for the audience. Education majors are often judged on speaking ability because the trait is so important in the classroom.
- ◆ **Non-verbal communication skills**, which include writing, are important for similar reasons to public speaking skills. Not only

will these skills help education majors with their own assignments, but they will also help on the job, when it will be necessary to give clear directions and present information clearly.

- ◆ **Flexibility** is needed to help education majors cope with unexpected changes. Student teachers must often adapt to schedule changes, shortages of materials, and children who need extra help. These situations can't be predicted, so it's useful to be able to find an alternative way of meeting goals on the spur of the moment.
- ◆ **Patience** is another important trait during unexpected situations. In addition to coming up with flexible solutions, it's crucial for a teacher to remain calm and maintain control of the situation. Failing to do so might discourage students or even cause a panic.

## Challenges with the Education Major

The education major involves a lot of fieldwork outside of the college. In addition to attending classes, completing assignments, and studying, education majors must find time to fulfill student-teaching requirements—equivalent to working at a part-time job during the school year. Moreover, student teaching also involves “homework” in the form of planning lessons, grading assignments, and meeting with supervising teachers and professors. Students considering the education major must be prepared to make these commitments.

Another consideration about majoring in education is that it incorporates many government regulations that students must fulfill. Because education majors will be working with children, at least in a student-teaching capacity, they are subject to local laws intended to protect children. These laws differ by city and state, but they usually require fingerprinting and a background check, a seminar on child abuse awareness, and a clean bill of health. This last requirement may include testing for specific medical conditions and immunizing against certain diseases. Furthermore, education majors must pay fees to the appropriate government agencies and medical professionals for these services—an expense that doesn't come up for students in other majors!

## The Perception of Education Majors

Teaching as a career has undergone some major image changes over the years. One hundred years ago, it was considered a suitable occupation for unmarried women who wanted to earn some money. It was an acceptable job for these women in terms of both their safety—they could go home while it was still daylight—and their reputation, because they would be surrounded by innocent children rather than men. However, it was understood that once a teacher got married, she would give up her job.

Decades later, when more and more women began working outside the home, teaching remained an acceptable choice. The school day ended early, enabling married teachers to go home on time to get their husband's dinner on the table and tend to their own children. In addition, working with children was seen as something women were naturally equipped to do, so to a large extent, women entering the teaching field were steered toward elementary schools. Male teachers were more likely to be employed by high schools, especially in traditionally “male” subjects such as math and science.

As time went by, however, world events led to an increased focus on education as a skilled profession. One oft-cited milestone was *Sputnik*, the Soviet spacecraft that took the United States by surprise and raised concerns that American education was lagging behind, especially in the sciences. No longer was it a matter of teaching basic skills and acclimating immigrants' children to American life. Now there was a big push to prepare students for the new demands of an increasingly competitive world. This led to more research into how children learn and how best to teach them. Soon there was increased focus on attracting, training, and retaining the best teachers possible. Today, this can be demonstrated by increased licensing requirements, including master's degrees, and by attractive benefit and retirement packages, even when base salaries are limited by budget constraints.

These events and trends have also influenced education in non-school settings. When *Sputnik* raised concerns about America's competitive edge, the effects went far beyond the schools. Corporate training also received a lot of attention. Instead of simply having a more experienced employee “show the ropes” to coworkers, companies began to

put a lot of effort into developing training manuals and videos, retreats, on-site classrooms, and staffs of training specialists. Other businesses arose that specialized in teaching professional skills for workers to take back to their companies. These skills may involve computer literacy, operating equipment, team building, sensitivity training, and numerous other areas of relevant knowledge.

With the increased interest in education, both inside and outside the schools, there has been a corresponding increase in education-related support services in other businesses, from the publishers that provide textbooks and training manuals to the television networks that produce educational programming. Toy manufacturers want their games to teach social, mental, and motor skills. Product packaging designers and public service agencies want their literature to teach the public about health, nutrition, and safety concerns. Companies like these have all discovered the advantages of hiring education professionals to achieve these goals.