ASK THE SONIC COACH (Q&A)
Career Advice for Aspiring Health Researchers
October 2007

From a Grade 12 Student: I've read through many university calendars and am beginning to understand the differences between programs and types of degrees, but I still find the terminology a bit confusing. What do they really mean when they say “general” vs “honours” degree? and “minor” vs “major” concentration?

SONIC Coach: In Canada, a “general” science degree (e.g., B.Sc.) involves three years of undergraduate study. Students must successfully complete a specified number of compulsory courses (a “minor concentration”) during which they will acquire a general understanding of their chosen field. They have significant latitude in the additional courses they can take to make up the balance of their program.

An “honours” science degree (e.g., B.Sc. Hons.) involves four years of study in which students develop a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of the subject material (a “major concentration”), and requires the achievement of a higher academic standard. This is the kind of program you need to complete if you plan to continue your studies at the graduate level (e.g., M.Sc., Ph.D.).

From a Grade 12 Student: I like all my math and science courses, and every program I see in the Arts and Science calendars seem interesting. Nothing stands out above the others! What do I do?

SONIC Coach: Most first year science and mathematics programs require that you study introductory Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Calculus and one other course (usually an elective). Regardless of what your declared major is, the “foundation year” looks the same. So go ahead and make a choice of program, based on your best judgment now. When you begin university, plunge right in with confidence and do your best.

As the year unfolds, you'll develop a better sense of the differences between majors (from conversations with upper-year students, academic advisors, and even faculty members), and discover what you're best at academically. You may even learn that a subject you thought was so very interesting at first is something you have no interest in studying further. With all this new information and experience, you will be able to reevaluate your original choice. If you decide that a different major would be a better “fit” for you, you can simply change to that program in your second year.
Naturally, there are exceptions. Some programs are highly specialized from the moment you begin (e.g., some human science programs such as kinesiology, and professional programs such as Engineering), and the requirements for admission and graduation are more stringent than for other programs. Transferring in after a year or two of university may not be possible, or if it is (and you are accepted), you may be required to make up courses in the summer, take on a heavier load during the regular academic year, or take longer to complete the program, in order to make up the missing courses. If you already know that such a program interests you, apply to it from high school.

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