

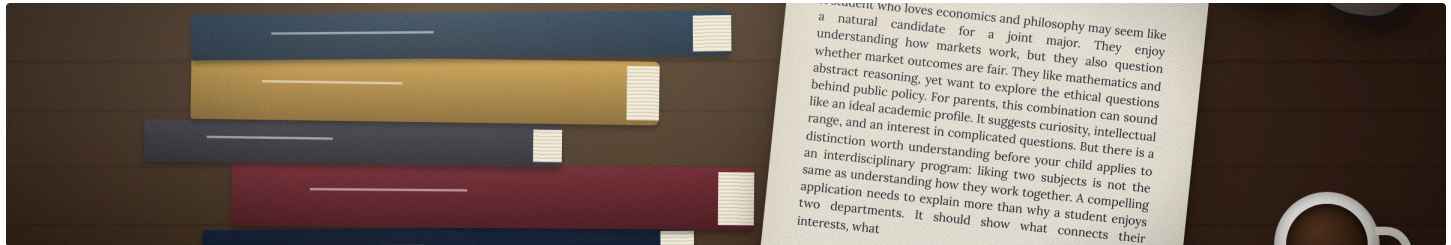
ADMISSIONS STRATEGY

The Interdisciplinary Major Mirage: Proving You Can Handle Two Departments at Once



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October 20, 2026



A student who loves economics and philosophy may seem like a natural candidate for a joint major. They enjoy understanding how markets work, but they also question whether market outcomes are fair. They like mathematics and abstract reasoning, yet want to explore the ethical questions behind public policy.

For parents, this combination can sound like an ideal academic profile. It suggests curiosity, intellectual range, and an interest in complicated questions.

But there is a distinction worth understanding before your child applies to an interdisciplinary program: liking two subjects is not the same as understanding how they work together.

A compelling application needs to explain more than why a student enjoys two departments. It should show what connects their interests, what questions those interests raise, and why studying both fields would help them investigate those questions.

THE PROBLEM WITH BEING INTERESTED IN EVERYTHING

Students with broad interests sometimes worry that choosing one academic direction means abandoning everything else. An interdisciplinary major can appear to solve that problem by allowing them to pursue several interests at once.

Yet combining subjects does not automatically create a coherent academic plan.

Imagine a student who wants to study economics because they enjoy understanding money and markets, and philosophy because they like debating difficult questions. Both interests are legitimate. But if their application treats them as two unrelated preferences, it leaves an important question unanswered: why does this particular combination make sense?

Now consider a student interested in housing affordability. They want to understand why rents rise, how housing supply responds to demand, and how governments evaluate different policies. Economics can help them examine incentives, costs, and market behavior. Philosophy can help them consider competing ideas about fairness, individual rights, and the responsibilities of governments.

The two disciplines do not provide identical answers. They offer different tools for examining different parts of the same problem.

That connection gives the student's interests a clearer purpose.

WHAT INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDY ACTUALLY REQUIRES

The term interdisciplinary can sound like an invitation to explore without boundaries. In practice, serious joint programs often require students to develop substantial knowledge of each discipline while learning how the subjects intersect.

Columbia University's joint major in Economics-Philosophy illustrates this structure. The university

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describes the program as introducing students to the basic methods of both fields while examining shared concerns, including rational decision-making, justice, well-being, and collective choice. Its requirements include economics coursework alongside philosophy, logic, probability, and decision theory.¹

Northeastern University's combined Economics and Philosophy degree similarly includes economics theory, statistics, and applied econometrics, alongside philosophy courses such as logic and the history of philosophical thought.²

These curricula reveal something important for prospective applicants. Interdisciplinary study is not simply an opportunity to sample several subjects. It involves learning distinct ways of reasoning and developing the ability to use them appropriately.

Parents should therefore look beyond the program's title. Read the course requirements. Examine the methods students learn. Identify the questions the program is designed to help them investigate.

The goal is to understand what the combination actually involves before presenting it as the student's academic destination.

FIND THE QUESTION THAT NEEDS BOTH FIELDS

A useful way to develop an interdisciplinary application is to begin with a question rather than a list of interests.

Consider several possibilities.

A student interested in economics and philosophy might ask whether a policy that increases overall prosperity is necessarily fair to everyone affected by it.

A student interested in computer science and psychology might wonder how interface design influences human decisions, or how developers should account for the limitations of human attention.

A student drawn to biology and public policy might investigate how scientific evidence should inform decisions when a policy's costs and benefits fall unevenly across communities.

In each example, the disciplines contribute something different. One may help explain how a system operates; the other may help examine its human implications, underlying assumptions, or competing priorities.

The student does not need to solve the entire problem before applying to college. Nor must they demonstrate expertise in both fields while still in high school.

What matters is that they can explain the connection in a way that reflects genuine curiosity.

Parents can help by asking: What question keeps drawing you back to these two subjects? What can one field explain that the other cannot fully address? What would you like to understand that requires both perspectives?

These questions encourage students to move beyond the claim that they are interested in many things and toward an explanation of why those interests belong together.

SHOW PREPARATION WITHOUT PRETENDING TO BE AN EXPERT

An interdisciplinary applicant should also demonstrate readiness to engage with the academic demands of the program.

That does not mean taking every advanced course available or conducting formal research in two separate disciplines. Preparation should be appropriate to the student's age, school opportunities, and intended program.

For a student interested in economics and philosophy, preparation might include studying economics, developing mathematical skills, reading philosophical arguments, or writing a paper that examines the reasoning behind a public policy debate.

A student interested in computer science and psychology might build a simple application and investigate how people interact with it. Someone interested in environmental science and economics might compare different approaches to reducing waste and examine the incentives each approach creates.

The strongest examples connect preparation to a question.

A student who has analyzed a local issue, compared competing explanations, or revised an initial assumption can discuss what the experience taught them. That reflection provides more useful information than simply listing two unrelated activities to demonstrate breadth.

Importantly, applicants should not exaggerate what they have accomplished. A high school student can demonstrate intellectual seriousness without claiming to have solved a complex economic, scientific, or ethical

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problem.

WHY ACADEMIC FIT MATTERS MORE THAN THE LABEL

Another common mistake is assuming that every college uses the same structure for interdisciplinary study.

Some universities offer a formal joint major with requirements established by two departments. Others provide combined degrees, interdisciplinary programs, concentrations, or opportunities to pursue a second major. Admission may occur directly into the program, through a broader university application, or after enrollment.

The University of British Columbia, for example, describes its combined Philosophy and Economics major as requiring coursework in both disciplines as well as joint requirements. Admission is subject to the applicable economics admission process and program requirements.³

These differences matter because an application should reflect the actual program, not a generic idea of what an interdisciplinary education looks like.

Parents should encourage their children to investigate three things: the subjects and methods required, the opportunities to study questions across departmental boundaries, and the specific application instructions.

A student should be able to explain why the combination at that university suits their interests. Mentioning two departments by name is not enough if the student cannot identify what they hope to learn there.

HELP YOUR CHILD CONNECT THE DOTS

Parents can support this process without choosing an academic identity for their child.

Start by looking at the student's existing interests and experiences. Which questions have they returned to voluntarily? Which subjects have influenced how they understand a problem? Have they encountered a situation in which one perspective seemed insufficient?

Then help them explore whether a genuine connection exists.

Not every pair of interests needs to become an interdisciplinary major. A student can enjoy literature and mathematics without needing to combine them in a single degree. Breadth can remain valuable even when interests do not converge into one academic focus.

Equally, students do not need a fixed career plan to justify interdisciplinary study. They may discover new interests after taking college courses, meeting faculty, or encountering unfamiliar problems.

The purpose is not to manufacture a perfectly unified personal narrative. It is to help students articulate the intellectual connections that genuinely interest them.

THE REAL TEST IS WHETHER THE CONNECTION HOLDS UP

An interdisciplinary major is not valuable simply because its title sounds distinctive. Its value lies in the questions it allows a student to explore and the different methods it teaches them to use.

For applicants, that creates a practical challenge. They must show enough interest in each subject to take it seriously while explaining why studying the subjects together matters.

A student does not need to arrive with every answer. They need a thoughtful question, credible preparation, and a clear explanation of why the combination is worth pursuing.

The most useful question parents can ask is not, "How can we make two interests look impressive?" It is, "What can your child understand by studying these subjects together that they would struggle to understand through either one alone?"

The answer is a stronger starting point for an application—and a more meaningful reason to choose the major in the first place.

HOW SCHOLAR COACH HELPS FAMILIES TURN BROAD INTERESTS INTO A COHERENT APPLICATION

For parents, the challenge is often knowing how to help without taking over. You may recognize that your child has several genuine interests, but figuring out which ones belong together, how to demonstrate academic preparation, and how to connect those interests to a specific college program can be difficult.

This is where Scholar Coach can help.

The process begins by examining your child's existing academic interests, coursework, extracurricular activities, and experiences to identify the questions that genuinely

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engage them. Rather than starting with a major that sounds impressive, the goal is to understand what your child wants to investigate and why.

Next, Scholar Coach helps families explore how those interests might connect across disciplines. For a student considering economics and philosophy, for example, that could mean examining how economic incentives relate to questions of fairness or public policy. The connection must reflect the student's actual interests, not a narrative invented to make an application sound sophisticated.

The next step is to assess academic preparation. Which relevant courses has your child taken? What have they read, researched, built, or explored independently? Are there opportunities to develop their understanding through an appropriate project, further coursework, or deeper engagement with an existing activity? The objective is to build on what the student has genuinely done rather than manufacture credentials.

Scholar Coach can then help families research the specific programs under consideration, including their course requirements, interdisciplinary structure, and application prompts. This allows students to explain why a particular program fits their interests instead of relying on generic statements about academic flexibility or intellectual curiosity.

Finally, the process brings these elements together into an application narrative that the student can explain in their own words: the question that interests them, the

experiences that prompted it, the perspectives they want to combine, and the reasons a particular program offers a meaningful next step.

The result is a more deliberate approach to interdisciplinary applications. Students are not simply presenting two interests side by side; they are learning to explain the connection between them, demonstrate appropriate preparation, and articulate what they hope to discover through further study.

For parents, the practical starting point is simple: help your child identify a question worth exploring before trying to package that interest for admissions. Scholar Coach can guide your family through the steps that follow, from clarifying academic interests and evaluating preparation to researching program fit and developing an authentic application narrative.

SOURCES

¹ Columbia University, Department of Philosophy, The Undergraduate Major in Philosophy & Economics:

<https://philosophy.columbia.edu/content/undergraduate-major-philosophy-economics>

² Northeastern University, Undergraduate Academic Catalog, Economics and Philosophy, BS:

<https://catalog.northeastern.edu/undergraduate/social-sciences-humanities/economics/economics-philosophy-bs/>

³ University of British Columbia, Department of Philosophy, Combined Major in Philosophy and Economics:

<https://philosophy.ubc.ca/undergraduate/ba-philosophy/combined-majors/combined-major-in-philosophy-and-economics/>

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