

Do Successful People Choose Their Majors Based on Dreams or on Reality?

Dreaming of becoming a mathematician with a PhD, a public prosecutor, an economist, a famous writer or business executive?



Students must choose majors appropriate to their strengths and abilities. PHOTO: DAO NGOC THACH

There is no magic formula in choosing the most suitable major to achieve your ambitions.

Dream!

Dr. Tran Nam Dung, a PhD in Mathematics and Vice Provost of the High School for the Gifted of the National University in Ho Chi Minh city, won a silver medal at the 1983 International Mathematics Olympiad, and went on to study university as a research student at Lomonosov University in Russia.

He recalls his childhood dream: *“I wanted to become an airline pilot, touching the clouds, seeing beyond the horizon. But how could a feeble and sickly young boy of less than 40 kg me ever achieve that?”*

But when he was eight, he read a book about 16 international mathematics contests and started dreaming about winning an international medal in Mathematics, just like Hoang Le Minh or Vu Dinh Hoa. In the 11th grade, he actually won a silver medal and went on to study Mathematics at university. Dr. Tran Nam Dung is now still considered the mentor of many Vietnamese younger mathematics prodigies. According to Dr. Tran Nam Dung, students should not hesitate to dream high and wide, but, meanwhile, keep their firmly on the ground.

While she was a child, the famous young author and businesswoman, Tue Nghi, dreamed working in Law and becoming a public prosecutor and grew up to study Economic Law. *“I never thought of becoming a businesswoman,”* she confesses. *“But when I was finishing junior high school, my life took a new turn and I had to earn a living on my own, which made me forget about becoming a prosecutor. Although my current work doesn’t exactly resemble my childhood dreams, when legal issues arise, I can apply my studies to my work, so I have almost achieved my goals.”*

How to choose a major

Based on his experiences, Dr. Tran Nam Dung advises students to choose a major that is appropriate to their special abilities. “If you’re academically strong, if you can meet challenges and work under pressure, choose a top university. However, if you are average, choose a school you can handle,” he warns. *“Once you have made your choice, focus on graduating with passion and discipline. Studying is easy, but if you find it difficult, forget about trying to develop complex projects, such as innovative startups.”*

When life is not what you dreamed

According to businesswoman Tue Nghi, it is rare to find someone who had only one childhood dream and grew up living it. *“If you pick the wrong major or your current work is not like your dream, you can still succeed and achieve great things that keep you passionate about your job, allow you to set goals and focus all your energy on them,”* she explains.

Dreaming one thing as a child, studying something unrelated and then finding a completely different job is perfectly normal, says Dr. Pham Thi Thuy, a lecturer at the National Academy of Politics. *“This is not a problem at all,”* she explains. *“Your four years at university are never wasted, you learn how to reason and many other skills. With these, you can succeed in any type of job, and research other topics independently. In today’s technological environment, reasoning skills and flexibility will never fail you.”*

Ms. Tue Nghi also believes that, if you choose an appropriate, interesting major, you will never feel frustrated when difficulties arise. At first, she chose to study Finance and Banking but after one year she felt bored and decided to go back into Economic Law, which was closer to her initial childhood ambitions.

Dr. Tran Nguyen Hai of the DTU Institute of Fundamental Science and Application in Ho Chi Minh city is only 35 years old but has already published 46 international papers, 34 as the main author, in 28 in journals ranked Q1, the highest Web of Science category. He is an editorial board member of 12 international journals indexed by ISI and Scopus. As a child, Dr. Tran Nguyen Hai dreamed of becoming a high school mathematics teacher. But at university he studied land management, which bears no relation to his childhood dreams or his current research.

Dr. Tran Nguyen Hai believes that students should choose a major based on their personal passions and interests. *“At university, there are three skills you should practice: working independently, creative thinking and problem-solving,”* he says. *“Whoever masters these skills at university will succeed, whether or not their work is affiliated to their major or comes close to their dreams.”*

(Media Center)