Academic Major Decidedness: A Study of First-Generation and Non-First Generation Undergraduate Business Students

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ABSTRACT

The authors investigate how job-related beliefs, professors, and families influence major decidedness for undergraduate business students. When students are decided about their major, they can focus on studies, have clearer direction, and reduce the time and number of classes necessary to complete their degree. By understanding how business students decide their academic major, universities can better direct recruitment, guidance, and retention resources. Using survey data from 410 undergraduates, the authors link job-related beliefs to major decidedness and show when students are optimistic about career potential, job structure, and the people orientedness of the profession associated with their major they will be more decided about their major. The findings also confirm the effects of professors and families on academic major decidedness. The results offered herein represent a call to action suggesting professors should spend time with undecided students, so they can better coach the students as they decide their major. Additionally, business schools should direct resources to educate family members, so they can help students decide their major. Lastly, when examining differences between first-generation and non-first generation students, the authors found professors and family members were more influential to the first-generation population. Hence, first-generation students are more receptive to guidance about their academic major.

KEYWORDS

Business Schools, Structural Equation Modeling, Survey, First-Generation Undergraduates, Theory of Reasoned Action

INTRODUCTION

Existing research indicates when students are satisfied with their academic major they are better motivated (Suhre, Jansen, & Harskamp, 2007), have a greater sense of belonging (Soria & Stebleton, 2013), and achieve higher grade-point averages (Nauta, 2007), than those who are undecided. However, actually deciding can be daunting as information about available majors increases. Students regularly experience frustration as they realize that deciding on a major has significant consequences. Besides unnecessary classes that may not count towards graduation, deciding on an academic major positions the student for certain occupations, which can limit long-term career growth and earnings potential.

While some students know what they want to study before entering university, many undergraduates seek additional information before deciding on a major. Studies show students pursue specific majors for a variety of reasons including of personal interest (Kim, Markham, Cangelosi, 47
When looking at the current population of undergraduates, we find that roughly 15% of incoming freshman pursue a business degree while attending a four-year university (Eagan, Lozano, Hurtado, & Case, 2013). When compared to historical averages we note that the number of business majors has declined from its peak of 27% (Astin, Green, Korn, & Schalit, 1988). To increase the number of students majoring in business, college administrators need to better understand the factors that influence today’s undergraduates as they decide on a major. By increasing the number of business students, administrators should expect additional students in business classes, which secures funding from the larger university pool. Once key influencers are identified, administrators can develop strategies to provide the necessary information to assist students through the process of actually deciding on an academic major.

While much work on has been done to identify the different personal, economic, and social factors that influence the major-decision process, we believe we found a gap that warrants investigation. Specifically, we found no work examining the factors that influence first-generation undergraduate business students when deciding their academic major. This is important when you consider that today’s students (Millennials) have different perspectives and ways of thinking when compared to previous student populations and administrators should consider these differences when offering information about majors (Montag, et al., 2012).

We find this topic interesting since first-generation students appears to acquire an appreciation for business disciplines over time. Research shows that while 11% of first-generation students major in business when they start college, that by the time they graduate or drop out that approximately 20% commit to a business discipline (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Like Nauta (2007), we believe that if students are satisfied with their major that they will likely perform better academically and improve the probabilities of graduating.

While existing research suggests a host of economic, personal, and social factors can influence the major-selection process (Hermanson, Hermanson, & Ivancevich, 1995), we look at how students associated with the college of business are affected by job-related beliefs, professors, and family (not just parents) when deciding their academic major. Hence, we examine the following research questions in the overall population and then compare results between first-generation students and non-first generation students.

A. Do job-related beliefs affect students’ attitudes about their academic major?
B. Do students’ attitudes about their academic major affect the level of major decidedness?
C. Does professors and family affect the students’ level of major decidedness?
D. Does the influence of the job-related beliefs, professors, or family differ when considering first generation and non-first generation students?

The current work uses structural equation modeling to (a) test how job-related beliefs affect a students’ attitude and their decision towards an academic major, (b) determine if professors and family affect the major decision process, and (c) assess differences between first-generation and non-first generation students.

We organize this article in the following manner. First, we introduce our theoretical frame and the hypotheses that stem from this perspective. Second, we explain the survey instrument and methods used in the methodology section. We then review key statistics and draw conclusions in the findings section. Lastly, we discuss limitations and future research prospects.
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