

# SELECTING A BUSINESS MAJOR WITHIN THE COLLEGE OF BUSINESS

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*This study employed a survey in examining the important influences that shape a student's selection of a major in the College of Business (COB). In particular, it compared these influences, by major, to assess which items were most (and least) important to the students majoring in accounting, general business, finance, management, marketing, and MIS. The influences, totaling 37, included internal influences (e.g., interest in the field), external influences (e.g., projected salary), and interpersonal influences (influence of significant others). Some of the findings were consistent with those of prior studies. For example, interesting work was highly important for all business majors, and specific interpersonal influences such as parents, high school teachers, and peers were relatively unimportant. The findings presented herein suggest that the overall impact of interpersonal influence may have been underestimated in previous studies. Unlike many previous studies, this study showed that job availability and job security were more important to students than interest in the field. This study augments the extant literature in that the survey was conducted right after the 2009 recession, which allowed an analysis of student decision making during a period of high unemployment and lingering economic uncertainty. Implications and suggestions for further research are discussed.*

*Keywords: business, college major, careers, survey*

In recent years, declining support for higher education (Hugstad, 1997), increased competition for business students from nontraditional educational providers, corporate universities, online universities (Pappu, 2004; Smart, Kelley, & Conant 1999), and negative headlines (Enron, dotcom bust, outsourcing, the "Great Recession," etc.) have combined to affect enrollment in business schools and the various departments within business schools. For universities and the colleges, and for departments within a university, students' collective decisions regarding college majors affect funding and resource allocation to and within the university. Resource allocation may be particularly salient to state universities where resources are allocated using funding formulas based on faculty credit hours generated, attendance, number of majors, retention, and/or number of graduates. Moreover, for organizations that employ college graduates, and for the general economy of states and nations where those organizations reside, students' collective decisions regarding college majors also affect the degree to which college graduates can contribute to organizational and broader economic and social objectives.

The choice of major, a decision that every student makes at least once in his or her college career, also affects that individual's life during and after college. A college student faces an uncertain future, and most are aware of the likely importance of the choice of a college major on future employment opportunities, compensation, and job satisfaction. In this context, most students are likely to give thoughtful and at least intentionally-rational consideration to the decision (Simon, 1977).

The primary purpose of this research is to examine factors that business students perceive as having been important in their earlier decision to pursue both (a) a major in the College of Business and (b) the specific major selected within the College of Business. To the degree that identifying the perceived influences provides insight into the factors that lead an individual to select a business (or any) major, this information may be relevant for individuals as they try to match their own interests and abilities to potential careers, to universities, colleges, and departments that seek to



understand and affect student decisions, and to the organizations and society within which those students will work. In addition to providing insight regarding earlier decisions, identifying perceptions regarding factors students recall as having been important could help us better understand how students are socialized (anticipatory socialization) and prepared for their future lives.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Our review of the literature focuses on students pursuing four-year bachelor's business degrees. In examining this literature, influences that shape the choice of major may be broadly categorized as internal influences, such as ability, skills, and self-efficacy, external influences, including rewards related to both compensation and job security, and the influence of other people (Downey, McGaughey, & Roach, 2009; Roach, McGaughey, & Downey, 2011; Strasser, Ozgur, & Schroeder, 2002).

### Ability, Skills, and Self-Efficacy

One set of influences on a student's selection of a college major are the student's skills or abilities and the student's personal assessment of his or her abilities (Coperthwaite & Knight, 1995; Downey et al., 2009; Hansen & Newman, 1999; Roach et al., 2011; Strasser et al., 2002). Students tend to choose majors perceived as a good fit with their skills and abilities and the skills and abilities required in related fields of work (Schlee, Curren, Kiesler, & Harich, 2007). Skills that may have a bearing on the selection of a specific business major include quantitative, technical, entrepreneurial, creative, and people-oriented skills. This interpretation is consistent with self-efficacy theory, which argues that perceptions regarding one's capabilities in a specific domain are an important precursor to motivation and performance (Bandura, 1986, 1997). To paraphrase an oft cited quotation of Henry Ford, if you think you can, you can, but if you think you cannot, then you cannot. This interpretation is supported by findings that students with high standardized scores in math and science tend to choose technical majors and, more to the point, students who believe they have high quantitative and/or technical abilities tend to choose math, science, or engineering majors (Farley & Staniec, 2004; Lapan, Shaughnessy, & Boggs, 1996). By contrast, students with lower quantitative scores are more likely to pursue liberal arts' degrees (Carter, 2006; Maple & Stage, 1991).

Studies of business majors mirror studies that focus more broadly on majors across the university as a whole. Business students tend to pursue a fit between perceived ability and the degree they pursue; i.e., students with high quantitative self-efficacy tend to pursue accounting degrees, students with high people-oriented self-efficacy tend to pursue management and/or marketing degrees, students with high creative self-efficacy tend to pursue marketing degrees, and students with high technical self-efficacy tend to pursue MIS degrees (Kim, Markham, & Cangelosi, 2002; Schlee et al., 2007). The relationship between quantitative skills and business school majors is also supported by a study indicating that sophomore students majoring in accounting score higher on quantitative tests than do their counterparts majoring in management or marketing (Pritchard, Potter, & Saccucci, 2004).

Perceptions regarding people-oriented skills also influence student choice of major (Strasser et al., 2002). Interpersonal skill may be more important than technical skills as students try to ensure that their skills and preferences match their expectations with careers in different fields (Strasser et al., 2002). Students tend to perceive that management and marketing majors and associated careers require strong interpersonal skills, and students pursuing those degrees see themselves, and are seen by other students (pursuing accounting, finance, and MIS degrees), as possessing strong people-oriented skills and relatively low quantitative skills (Schlee et al., 2007).

Perceptions regarding creativity may also influence students' selection of a college major. For example, creative skills are often viewed as important for students pursuing a degree and career in marketing. By contrast, the stereotypical accountant may be viewed as a number cruncher whose job requires little to no creativity (Hunt, Falgiani, & Intrieri, 2004; Siegel, 2000). This leads to our first hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: The importance of quantitative skills as a reported influence on the choice of a college major within the College of Business will be higher for students pursuing majors perceived as quantitative (accounting, finance) than for students pursuing other majors.

Hypothesis 2: The importance of technical skills as a reported influence on the choice of a college major within

the College of Business will be higher for students pursuing majors perceived as technical (MIS) than for students pursuing less technical business majors.

Hypothesis 3: The importance of interpersonal skills as a reported influence on the choice of a college major within the College of Business will be higher for students pursuing majors in general business, management, and marketing than for students pursuing other majors.

Hypothesis 4: The importance of creative skills as a reported influence on the choice of a college major within the College of Business will be higher for students pursuing majors perceived as creative (marketing) than for students pursuing other majors and lower for students pursuing majors perceived as not requiring creativity (accounting) than for other majors.

### Personal Interest in Subject

Genuine interest in a field may be the most important factor when it comes to choosing a college major (Adams, Pryor, & Adams, 1994; Cohen & Hanno, 1993; Coperthwaite & Knight, 1995; Malgwi, Howe, & Burnaby, 2005; Strasser et al., 2002; Zhang 2007). As students decide on a college major, they likely think about the implications of that choice on the type of work they will do after graduation and whether or not they will find that work interesting.

Many studies support the importance of interest in the field on students' decisions regarding college major. For example, both Kim et al. (2002) and Strasser et al. (2002) reported that business students rated interest in the field as the most important factor when choosing a major, above monetary compensation and job opportunity. Similarly, Moorman and Johnson (2003) report a correlation between interest in technology and majoring in technology fields such as computer science. Several authors conclude that interest in the field in college is related to student perceptions regarding work in that field following graduation (Adams et al. 1994; Malgwi et al., 2005; Mauldin, Crain, & Mounce, 2000; Strasser et al., 2002) and that interest in the field is the most influential factor in the choice of a college major (Adams et al., 1994; Cohen & Hanno, 1993; Malgwi et al., 2005; Strasser et al., 2002; Zhang, 2007). Strasser et al. (2002), while acknowledging its importance for all business majors, provide evidence suggesting that personal interest may be particularly important to management majors. They also suggest that the finding that business students valued interesting work more highly than career benefits and pay runs counter to commonly held perceptions of business students as individuals whose sole concern is money rather than enjoyment or interest.

While students identify personal interest as a driving force in their selection of a major, some research suggests that there may be a mismatch between students' perceptions regarding the work they expect to do after graduating with a particular degree and what they actually end up doing in jobs that are available. For example, marketing students' perception of marketing as consisting of advertising and selling may be too narrow (O'Brien & Deans, 1995). Such mismatches often lead to disappointment and low job satisfaction (Premack & Wanous, 1985; Wanous, 1992). One antidote is to provide students with realistic job previews (Wanous, 1992). By better informing students about career realities, it may be possible to help them make more effective choices of a college major and career path.

Personal interest may be particularly important for majors where students perceive themselves as having made a heavy investment in their education. For example, students pursuing accounting or finance degrees may view the quantitative requirements for these degrees as making their degrees more difficult to obtain than other degrees in the business school. Similarly, students pursuing MIS degrees may view the technology requirements for these degrees as making their degrees more difficult to obtain than other degrees in the business school. In addition to the nature of the degrees themselves, the 150 hour requirement for accounting students who want to become CPAs increases the investment, both in time and money, for accounting students. Students pursuing these degrees may justify their decisions in terms of personal interest in order to reduce cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957).

Hypothesis 5: The importance of personal interest as a reported influence on the choice of a college major within the College of Business will be relatively high among all majors.

Hypothesis 6: The importance of personal interest as a reported influence on the choice of a college major within the College of Business will be higher for students pursuing accounting, finance, and MIS majors than for students pursuing general business, management, and marketing majors.



## Financial Concerns: Compensation and Job Security

Consistent with both behavioral (e.g., reinforcement) and cognitive (e.g., equity, expectancy) theories of motivation, anticipated outcomes, such as starting salary and expected future earnings (Berger, 1988; Farley & Staniec, 2004; Felton, Buhr & Northey, 1994) as well as “career opportunities” (Mauldin et al., 2000; Pappu, 2004), affect students’ selection of college majors. Issues related to job security are also likely to be quite important to many students’ selection of a college major, and perhaps especially important to business students. Several studies suggest that career prospects and job availability are at or near the top of the list of influences on an individual’s choice (O’Brien & Deans, 1995). Compensation and job security are principal reasons cited by business students reflecting on their selection of a college major (Cebula & Lopes, 1983; Kim et al., 2002; Mauldin et al., 2000), and that is consistent across the spectrum for different business majors, including accounting (Giladi, Amoo, & Friedman, 2001), finance (Kim et al., 2002; Siegall, Chapman, & Boykin, 2007), marketing (Kim et al., 2002; Siegall et al., 2007; Swenson et al., 1993), management (Kim et al., 2002; Siegall et al., 2007), and MIS/CIS (Downey et al., 2009; Goff, 2000; Roach et al., 2011).

High school and college students likely perceive business careers as alternatives in which both starting salary and career earnings will be high, and rightly so. Recent statistics reported in the Payscale Salary Report for 2011-2012 and in the Occupational Outlook Handbook for 2010-2011 show that starting salaries and career earnings for traditional business majors like general business, finance, accounting, management, marketing, finance, and MIS, while not as high as those for more technical degrees like engineering, are higher than most majors, particularly those in liberal arts and the social sciences. Those same sources show that expected salaries in accounting, finance, and MIS are greater than those for management, marketing, and general business. Students may obtain specific information about expected salaries from sources like those cited before choosing a major, or they may be affected by more general information that they glean from magazines, television, and movies. Once in college, these expectations may be reinforced by faculty, other students, and wage survey information provided by career services, departments, or schools. Given initial perceptions regarding anticipated pay and subsequent reinforcement of those perceptions, business majors are likely to recall both starting salary and career earnings as having been important influences on their selection of a business major. Similarly, prestige or status may be another extrinsic reward that affects a student’s selection of a college major (Thomas & Allen, 2006).

In addition to external rewards related to pay, students facing an uncertain future are also affected by the job opportunities, job availability, and job security associated with the majors they are pursuing (Aiken et al., 2008; Beggs, Bantham, & Taylor, 2008; Crampton, Walstrom, & Schambach, 2006; Felton, Buhr, & Northey, 1994; Kim et al., 2002; Li & Thompson, 2011; Malgwi et al., 2005; Mauldin et al., 2000). These factors are likely to have been particularly important in the current study due to economic conditions when the data were collected, late 2009 and early 2010, a time when national news and attention were riveted on economic conditions and persistent reports of high unemployment. Students who do their research are likely to notice that some majors outperform others in periods of economic uncertainty. For instance, MIS in particular fared quite well in the latest recession in terms of salary and job security (Sussman, 2010). Similarly the Federal Government’s bailout of financial institutions saved many jobs in finance (Sloan & Burke, 2011), and accounting jobs offer stability because businesses and individuals put even greater importance on taxes and accounting during a recession (Top 25 Careers to Pursue in Recession, 2011).

Like personal interest, financial outcomes may be particularly important for majors where students perceive themselves as having made a heavy investment in their education. In addition to justifying their decisions to pursue those degrees in terms of financial outcomes in order to reduce cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), students pursuing degrees they perceive as especially difficult are likely to view anticipated future salary differentials and job security as a fair outcome (Adams, 1963). Because accounting, finance, and MIS major requirements typically involve more math and analytical skills (as in programming courses for MIS majors), these majors are likely to be perceived as more difficult by students (Downey, McGaughey, & Roach, 2011; Saeman & Crooker, 1999; Stinebrickner & Stinebrickner, 2011).

Hypothesis 7: The importance of financial remuneration as a reported influence on the choice of a college major within the College of Business will be relatively high among all majors.

Hypothesis 8: The importance of financial remuneration as a reported influence on the choice of a college major within the College of Business will be higher for students pursuing accounting, finance, and MIS majors than for

students pursuing general business, management, and marketing majors.

Hypothesis 9: The importance of job availability and security as reported influences on the choice of a college major within the College of Business will be relatively high among all majors.

Hypothesis 10: The importance of job availability and security as reported influences on the choice of a college major within the College of Business will be higher for students pursuing accounting, finance, and MIS majors than for students pursuing general business, management, and marketing majors.

## Interpersonal Influences

Parents (Calkins & Welki, 2006; Farley & Staniec, 2004), high school teachers or counselors (Calkins & Welki, 2006; Mauldin et al., 2000), college instructors (Saemann & Crooker, 1999; Strasser et al., 2002), and friends or other students (Bartol, 1976; Calkins & Welki, 2006; Mauldin et al., 2000), may provide information, opinions, verbal encouragement, and support regarding the selection of a college major. They may also serve as role models or vicarious examples of success or failure. Research concerning the influence of others is mixed. For example, interviews of women working in information technology suggest that the impact of parents, family, peers, high school teachers, and college professors is important (Trauth, 2002; Woodfield, 2002; Zeldin & Pajares, 2000). Female subjects often cited male professors and/or fathers as having provided significant support as they pursued degrees and careers in IT (Trauth, 2002; Turner, Bernt, & Pecora, 2002; Zeldin & Pajares, 2000). Social influences may be greater for females than for males (Bartol, 1976; Calkins & Welki, 2006; Farley & Staniec, 2004). Parental influence may vary by major, with parents being more involved when students select some majors (e.g., engineering) than others (Astin, 1993). Research addressing the impact of peers, high school teachers, and high school counselors follows the same pattern: they have more influence on females than males, but overall, social influences tend to be perceived as less important than other influences (Calkins & Welki, 2004; Strasser et al., 2002; Zhang, 2007).

Though research tends to show that students perceive social influences as having little influence on their decisions, there are reasons to think that students underestimate the impact of others on their decision making. First, the impact of parents and high school teachers, counselors, and peers may have faded from memory. Second, as suggested by attribution theory (Jones & Nisbett, 1971; Nisbett, Caputo, Legant, & Marecek, 1973), people tend to underestimate the impact of external influences and overestimate the impact of internal influences on their own decisions. Finally, reflecting on the influence of others on his or her decision to pursue a particular major, a student is likely to focus more or less exclusively on the one interpersonal influence he or she regards as the most important.

Previous studies (Calkins & Welki, 2004; Downey et al., 2009; Roach et al., 2011; Strasser et al., 2002; Zhang, 2007) may also have underestimated the impact of others on students' decisions by focusing on each interpersonal influence individually. Because different individuals may be affected by different sources of interpersonal influence, the average for each interpersonal influence may be low even when many students are greatly affected by at least one interpersonal influence. For example, one individual may be influenced by her parents but not by her peers, while another individual may be influenced by his peers but not by his parents. As a result, though both are influenced by someone, the average for each specific influence may be moderate or low. In this study, we replicate previous studies by considering each interpersonal influence separately. We extend previous analyses by also considering the highest interpersonal influence for each respondent as a separate variable.

Hypothesis 11: The importance of each specific social influence (parent, teacher, etc.) as a reported influence on the choice of a college major within the College of Business will be relatively low among all majors.

Hypothesis 12: The importance of the most important social influence (parent, teacher, etc.) as a reported influence on the choice of a college major within the College of Business will be relatively high among all majors.

## Additional Descriptive Statistics

Our review of the literature and interviews with faculty suggest several other factors not addressed with specific hypotheses. Along with the hypotheses stated above, we report additional descriptive statistics that may inform future research.



## METHODOLOGY

We employed a survey methodology in our study. Survey participants were college students majoring in business at a Southern university with an enrollment of approximately 12,000. At the time of the survey, the College of Business included 1,276 students majoring in eight different disciplines, including accounting, economics, finance, insurance/risk management, management, marketing, management information systems (MIS), and General Business (see Table 1). At this university, students must be admitted to the College of Business, typically in their sophomore year. Students declare a major at that time. Many students who have not decided on a particular business discipline select the General Business major, which allows them to take courses in several disciplines, and many General Business majors switch to another major at a later time. Almost all students surveyed were pursuing a BBA (Bachelor of Business Administration) degree, the only degree available for almost all undergraduate business majors. The exception was Economics, wherein students could choose a BBA, BA or BS degree.

**Table 1**  
*Demographic Information*

Major	N	Age (mean/sd)	Male %/ Female %	Class Fr/So/Jr/Sr
Accounting	62	21.8 (3.5)	43/57	2/11/28/21
Finance	62	21.9 (1.5)	72/28	0/2/15/45
General Business	60	22.3 (3.7)	56/44	1/10/23/26
MIS	60	22.8 (4.9)	80/20	0/7/15/38
Marketing	65	21.1 (1.1)	50/50	0/12/28/25
Management	63	22.2 (2.5)	58/42	0/8/29/26
<b>Total</b>	<b>372</b>	<b>22.03 (3.0)</b>	<b>60/40</b>	<b>3/50/138/181</b>

As we developed our survey, we began by reviewing the literature regarding factors that influence a student's selection of a college major. Previous useful surveys included those developed by Downey et al. (2009), Kim et al. (2002), Mauldin et al. (2000), Pappu (2004), and Worthington and Higgs (2004). The items in these surveys and in the literature cited formed the beginning of our potential list of influences. Next, we presented a preliminary survey to several faculty members from different business disciplines. Following minor modifications, the survey was pilot tested on 20 students. This testing led to the rewording of some questions to enhance clarity. The final version consisted of 37 items of influence, demographic information, and various other items useful for future studies. For each item, influence was measured on a seven-point scale, with 1 = "Completely Unimportant" and 7 = "Very Important." The 37 items included influences such as job security, salary, interests, skills, the influence of other people, etc. These items, plus the variable we created to examine the "largest interpersonal influence," can be seen with relevant statistics in Table 2, presented in the next section.

In order to provide a cross-section of majors, we chose three courses to survey which were required of all business majors. These courses included Principles of Accounting 1 (taken mostly by sophomores/juniors), the management core class (taken mostly by juniors and seniors), and Managing Policy and Strategy (a capstone course taken by seniors). None of these courses were part of the general education courses that any major could take for credit, which meant that only business majors were likely to be in these courses. After obtaining permission from both chairs and instructors, multiple sections in each of these three courses were surveyed during class time.

In gathering these data, we tried to obtain an equal number of respondents from each major, so as not to unduly bias the results toward a particular major. Because the initial classes surveyed did not provide this equity, an additional upper division accounting class was also included. The result was an approximately equal number of respondents

per major (between 60 and 63 for each). A total of 433 surveys were received. In all, 61 were eliminated; 10 were incomplete, 12 were not business majors, and the rest were either economics majors (16) or insurance majors (23), which were excluded because many business colleges do not include such majors. In addition, these two majors had the smallest enrollments and obtaining sufficient sample size was problematic. This left a total of 372. As shown in Table 1, respondents in our sample averaged 22 years of age; about 40% were female; and most (approximately 85%) were juniors or seniors.

## RESULTS

Table 2 provides means, standard deviations, and rank for each influence item. To facilitate interpretation, the items are ordered with items rated higher at the top of the table. In addition, we ran one-way ANOVA and Tukey's test in examining differences across majors. For tests where the ANOVA produced a statistically significant result, we conducted a Tukey's post hoc test to identify specific differences between means. A summary of those results is presented in Table 2 as well.

### Ability, Skills, and Self-efficacy

Hypothesis 1 was not supported. There were no significant differences across majors regarding the importance of quantitative skills. Hypothesis 2 was supported by our data. The importance of technical skills was higher for MIS majors than for general business, management, marketing, and finance majors. Hypothesis 3 received partial support. Marketing majors rated the importance of both people skills and communications skills higher than did accounting or MIS majors. Similarly, general business rated the importance of both people skills and communications skills higher than did MIS majors. Somewhat surprisingly, management majors did not rate people skills and communications skills higher than any of the more technical or quantitative majors. Hypothesis 4 was supported. The opportunity to be creative was more important to marketing majors compared to other business majors and less important to accounting majors than to other majors.

### Personal Interest

Hypothesis 5 was supported. Interest in both the work and the field were rated near the top of the list (numbers 3 and 4, respectively). Hypothesis 6 was not supported. There were no significant differences among different majors when it came to the influence of interest in the work and field associated with the majors students were pursuing.

### Financial Concerns

Hypothesis 7 received partial support, with career earnings rated near the top of the list (number 5), while starting pay was rated a bit further down on the list (number 12). Hypothesis 8 received very limited support from our results. The omnibus test indicated that there were significant differences between majors, but the specific differences were not detectable (at the 0.05 level of significance). Hypothesis 9 was supported. Job security (number 1) and job availability (number 2) topped the list of factors that influenced students' selection of a college major in the College of Business. Hypothesis 10 was partially supported. Accounting majors rated the influence of job security higher than did marketing and management majors. Similarly, accounting majors rated the influence of job availability higher than did marketing and management majors. Though not hypothesized, accounting majors rated the influence of job security higher than did finance majors, perhaps indicative of a greater aversion to risk.

### Interpersonal Influences

Hypothesis 11 was supported by our results. We examined ten sources of interpersonal influence. Taken together, they were the last ten on the list. Hypothesis 12 was also supported. By contrast, the highest interpersonal influence would have been tied for tenth on the list, suggesting that, while individual interpersonal influences were not reported to be highly important by the business students studied, interpersonal influence more broadly defined was a significant influence on students' choice of major.

### Descriptive Statistics

Additional items are also reported in Table 2. These items are those identified in previous literature and/or in discus-



sions with colleagues and students but are not the subject of any hypotheses in this study.

**Table 2, Part 1**  
*Item Influences*

Influence of Each Item	Mean	F <sup>1</sup>	P	Differences between Means <sup>2</sup>	Hypotheses
Job security (long term)	6.12	3.51	.004	ACCT > MKT = MGMT	9, 10
Job availability (after graduation)	5.96	3.82	.002	ACCT > FIN = MKT = MGMT	9, 10
Interesting work	5.91	1.61	.157	Ns	5, 6
Interest in the field	5.90	1.32	.255	Ns	5, 6
Career earnings	5.81	3.10	.009	Could not detect	7, 8
Opportunity to lead	5.81	5.04	.000	MGMT = FIN = MKT = GENBUS > MIS	Exploratory
Lifestyle assoc. with major	5.74	2.82	.016	FIN > MIS	Exploratory
Opportunity to manage business	5.46	4.16	.001	MGMT > FIN = MIS = ACCT and GENBUS = MKT > MIS = ACCT	Exploratory
Opportunity to use people skills	5.45	6.90	.000	MKT > ACCT = MIS and GENBUS > MIS	3
Opportunity to use communication skills	5.42	5.56	.000	MKT > ACCT = MIS	Exploratory
Highest Interpersonal Influence <sup>3</sup>	5.42	3.12	.247	Ns	11, 12, post hoc
Interest in business organizations	5.40	2.92	.013	GENBUS > MIS	Exploratory
Starting salary	5.40	2.85	.015	Could not detect	7, 8
Opportunity to use creativity	5.29	12.39	.000	MKT > MIS = MGMT = FIN > ACCT and GENBUS = MIS = MGMT = FIN > ACCT	4
Quality of education in major	5.25	1.80	.112	Ns	Exploratory
Respect associated with major	5.24	3.61	.003	FIN = ACCT > MIS	Exploratory
Opportunity to use negotiation skills	5.21	4.42	.001	MKT > ACCT = MIS	Exploratory
Work is challenging	5.21	.98	.428	Ns	Exploratory
Opportunity to use technical skills	5.13	4.37	.001	MIS > FIN = MGMT = MKT = GENBUS	2
Opportunity to own a business	5.13	4.07	.001	GENBUS > MIS = ACCT	Exploratory
Prestige associated with major	5.09	3.28	.007	FIN = ACCT > MIS	Exploratory



**Table 2, Part 2**  
*Item Influences*

Influence of Each Item	Mean	F <sup>1</sup>	P	Differences between Means <sup>2</sup>	Hypotheses
Opportunity to manage people	5.08	5.86	.000	MGMT > FIN = MIS = ACCT and GENBUS > MIS = ACCT	Exploratory
Opportunity to use quantitative skills	4.95	1.87	.098	Ns	1
Opportunity to be part of a team	4.76	2.62	.024	Could not detect	Exploratory
Influence of introductory course in major	4.62	2.90	.014	ACCT > MIS = MGMT	Exploratory
Perceived degree of difficulty in major	4.37	1.29	.266	Ns	Exploratory
Previous work experience in major	4.35	5.40	.000	MGMT > FIN = ACCT and GENBUS = MKT > ACCT	Exploratory
Opportunity to manage non-human assets	4.33	6.73	.000	MIS > FIN = ACCT = MKT and MGMT = GENBUS = FIN > ACCT = MKT	Exploratory
University department's reputation	4.17	1.36	.237	Ns	11, 12
Influence of both parents	4.04	1.02	.404	Ns	11, 12
Influence of a college instructor	3.88	.670	.647	Ns	11, 12
Influence of male parent	3.57	.669	.648	Ns	11, 12
Influence of female parent	3.47	1.38	.229	Ns	11, 12
Influence of other male working in field	3.28	.81	.715	Ns	11, 12
Influence of friends or other students	3.28	1.07	.377	Ns	11, 12
Influence of other female working in field	3.05	2.94	.013	MKT = ACCT = MGMT > FIN	11, 12
Influence of high school teacher(s)	2.85	1.80	.112	Ns	11, 12
Influence of high school counselor(s)	2.43	1.82	.108	Ns	11, 12

Note. <sup>1</sup> F-tests were all one way ANOVAs with 6 groups (majors); n = 373, df = 5, 368 for all tests

<sup>2</sup> Tukey's tests to detect specific differences between group means with .05 level of significance; ns = F-test not significant and Tukey's test was not conducted; could not detect = Significant F-test but Tukey's test is not significant at 0.05 level of significance.

<sup>3</sup> Unlike other items in this table, Highest Interpersonal Influence was not a specific survey item but was computed as the maximum value for any of the interpersonal influences tested separately in hypotheses 11-12.



Based on this exploratory analysis, some tentative observations can be made. First, surprising to us, MIS rated the importance of respect and prestige lower than did accounting and finance majors and, though not statistically significant, they rated respect and prestige lower than did any other major. It is unclear as to whether the MIS majors simply do not regard prestige as important, or that they believe MIS has little prestige and thus it did not influence their choice. Second, MIS majors, sometimes significantly, rated the importance of the opportunity to lead, lifestyle, communication skills, and negotiation skills lower than did other majors. Finally, the influence of the introductory course was higher for accounting majors than for MIS and management majors.

## DISCUSSION

Studies of business student choice of major are not novel, and the findings of such studies over time have been largely consistent. Our findings to a large extent mirror the findings of prior studies of business student choice of major. We found, for example, that students pursuing different majors tend to choose majors that they see as a good “fit” for them—it reflects their interests. This finding is not unique, as most prior studies have shown interest in the field to be the most important influence on student choice of major. We found interest to be very important, as well, and that the nature of that “interest” varied across the business majors studied. A noteworthy difference in our findings was the increased importance of job availability and security. We found job availability and job security to be the most important influences overall on business student choice of major. Data for this study were collected in late 2009 and early 2010, a time during which the unemployment rate had hovered over 9% for three consecutive quarters and economists were warning of a jobless recovery. Our findings thus seem to indicate that student career choices may be influenced by economic conditions in much the same way as consumer choices are influenced—they tend to select “safe” alternatives, as opposed to alternatives that might better appeal to their “personal taste,” during periods of economic uncertainty.

### Ability, Skills, and Self-efficacy

Consistent with self-efficacy theory, students report that skills normally associated with a particular major influence their choice of a major. Specifically, MIS majors report technology skills as an important influence; marketing and general business majors report people skills as an important influence; and marketing students report creativity as an important influence. Our findings, or more accurately our lack of finding, with regard to management majors and people/communications skills, suggest that management majors may have focused on other macro issues, such as strategic management, rather than micro issues, such as people/communications skills, when they decided upon a college major. This interpretation is supported by the finding that management majors were at the top of the list, and were more likely than some majors to recall having been influenced by the opportunity to manage a business. It is also worth noting that accounting majors were significantly less influenced by the opportunity to be creative. This suggests that many, including students who do major in accounting, view accounting as a rule-based profession, despite research challenging that view (Sugahara, Boland, & Cilloni, 2008). To the degree that accounting can be demonstrated to provide opportunities to be creative—we are not referring to what some, in jest, call “creative accounting”—it may broaden the pool of students who consider that major. In terms of student recruiting, our study reinforces the importance of stressing the skills and competencies associated with a particular major. From a recruiting standpoint, students are likely to seek majors and careers where they perceive there to be a good fit between their skills and abilities and the requirements of the profession. Future research should consider placement by examining the relationship between student self-efficacy perceptions and actual performance within associated careers. It is also worth examining whether someone who lacks specific skills could develop those skills. As Schlee et al. (2007) note, it may be possible to broaden the pool of potential students and perhaps, by focusing on general capabilities, personal interest inventories, and personality measures, to better match individuals to majors and careers.

### Personal Interest

Among the most significant influences students recall affecting their decision process were interest in the field associated with each major and with the type of work students can expect to do when they graduate. These perceptions are uniform across majors. From a recruiting standpoint, these facets should be stressed as much as issues related to remuneration. Students need to have accurate information on the nature of work associated with the many business

career paths.

## Economic Concerns

In previous studies, personal interest has typically been rated the most influential factor in student choice of a college major. Perhaps due to the time period during which our data were collected, a period of high and persistent unemployment immediately following what politicians and the media have labeled the “the great recession,” economic influences topped the list of influences in our study. This was particularly true for majors generally regarded as quantitative and technical, majors that prepare graduates for jobs likely to be viewed as “safe bets” in a time of economic turmoil. Moreover, it is likely that these majors, accounting, finance, and management information systems, are regarded as requiring high commitment in terms of the time required to study and to complete assignments outside the classroom. A concern for economic uncertainty could, in part, reflect these students’ justifications (to themselves and others) for the increased commitment and concomitant effort associated with the degrees they are pursuing. In terms of student recruiting and placement, these results support the importance of stressing financial benefits and job security. Though always important, it may be especially important to stress these potential influences in times of economic uncertainty.

## Interpersonal influences

Previous studies, especially those based on surveys, have tended to find that interpersonal influences are substantially less important than personal interest and economic influences on choice of a college major. In one sense, our results mirror those findings. When considered individually, the reported influence of others at college, high school, and outside of school (parents and friends) was relatively low. In fact, high school and outside school influences were generally regarded as unimportant. Thus, mirroring previous studies, we found social influences to be relatively unimportant. However, another interpretation is possible. It may be that the impact of social influences is and has been underestimated by looking at each social influence separately. To examine this possibility, we created a new variable that examined the maximum social influence for each student. For some students, economic concerns might top the list. For others, social influences might top the list. Construed in this fashion, social influences rose to the approximate level of economic and personal interest. In terms of student recruiting and placement, our results suggest a more nuanced and multi-pronged approach. Some students are influenced by parents. It thus becomes important to ensure that parents are informed. This may be particularly true in universities, such as the one where this study was conducted, where many students are “first-generation” students. Other students are influenced by high school teachers and counselors. Given the small number of required business classes in the high school curriculum, providing information to counselors or simply visiting high schools to provide information directly may help influence some students. Finally, some students are influenced by early college experiences, such as a class taken early in the student’s academic career. Course design and the assignment of instructors to early courses are factors Business Schools may want to consider. Given the well-established importance of self-efficacy as an influence on students’ decisions regarding the selection of a college major, providing both academic support (e.g., help labs, extended office hours, review sessions) and encouragement aimed at increasing the likelihood that students attribute successful performance to ability and self-efficacy rather than to effort or luck would also be appropriate. Self-efficacy attributions may be particularly important for female students (Dweck, 1999, 2006; Kloosterman, 1988; Roach et al., 2011). Increased numbers of female instructors for disciplines with a gender imbalance (like MIS) could be helpful in showing young women that “they can do it.” The accounting profession seems to have been somewhat successful with this approach.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Our study has several limitations that can be addressed in future research. First, the data for this study were obtained from a single public university in the South. To ensure the generalizability of our results, future research might consider similarities and differences for other universities (e.g., private and public, urban and small town, different geographic regions).

Second, our study does not directly assess self-efficacy for each skill. Though the relationship between self-efficacy and college major decisions is well-established, the relationship between self-efficacy and factors business students



perceived to have been influential as they decided among majors within the business school has not, as far as we know, been adequately addressed in extant research.

Third, our study addresses factors that students recall as having influenced their earlier decisions to select a particular major. Collecting longitudinal data, including data for high school students and college freshmen, would provide added insight. One plausible alternative explanation for the results reported herein is that the differences observed in our study were due to socialization (both in terms of self-efficacy, and more generally, factors likely to be talked about by teachers and peers as important) rather than self-efficacy per se. If this is true, then the importance of major-related skills ought to become more important over time to students in those majors. We think research examining the impact of socialization processes on what students find important would be useful.

Finally, for both research and practical purposes, research should be broadened to include non-business majors in order to consider the factors important to students as they select various paths (business, computer science, engineering, arts and sciences, education, etc.). Efforts to expand overall business school enrollment should involve attracting students who might otherwise major in non-business disciplines. An understanding of what drives these students' choice of major would be important to any effort to attract them to the business disciplines.

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