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College Major Choice in the Liberal Arts Context: Exploring the Links Between Undergraduate Field of Study, Expected Career Outcomes, and Graduate/Professional Study

By Justin Etinger, Class of 2011

Introduction

Choosing a college major is an important decision in any undergraduate college student’s academic career. For many students it represents the first time that they have significant say in the making of a major educational decision that directly affects their future. The undergraduate major defines what department the majority of their courses will be taken in, what types of learning and research they will be conducting, and with whom they will surround themselves with in the classroom. As part of a culmination of over four decades of research on college’s affects on students, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) make a definitive conclusion: “undergraduate academic major can play a significant, if not always totally consistent, role in one’s career” (p. 500). While this is an inevitable and crucial choice that students must make, various avenues open to investigate the influencing factors behind a student’s choice of major, and to research the purported consistent role that it plays in career outcomes.

Stemming from my own experiences with choosing a major, this exploration is aimed at investigating how students come to make this choice. Specifically, it looks at students at liberal arts colleges and their experiences with the parameters implied by the array of majors that these institutions offer to students. Different from larger universities and specialized institutions, the academic offerings at liberal arts colleges are not vocationally linked and aim to provide the student with a wide view of academia and of the prospects that lay ahead of the undergraduate realm.

The niche for this study is therefore to supplement preexisting literature on the subject of college major choice. Qualitative in nature, this study explores the decision making process behind choosing a field of study for liberal arts college students, the influences in this decision, their predictions for employment, and their perceptions of the vocational applicability of their major.

Review of the Literature

Much of the current discourse on the subject agrees that the undergraduate major choice is significant in its implications, both for when the decision is made and for a student’s future (Beggs, Bantham, & Taylor, 2008; Freeman & Hirsch, 2008; Porter & Umbach, 2006). For students in large non-liberal arts universities, the major
that they ultimately declare directly impacts what job they seek upon graduation (Horn & Zahn, 2001). However students at liberal arts colleges face a different set of options in that the majors from that which they have to choose do not include directly vocationally-linked concentrations, such as Business, Marketing, Advertising, or Journalism. Related majors that students declare which are related to these fields are Economics, English, and Mathematics. The three most popular majors at liberal arts colleges are telling in their applications following the undergraduate education: English, Economics, and Political Science. These three majors represent popular feeders into business school and law school. It is not surprising then that at the elite liberal arts college studied here, Cannon University, 18% of graduates enter graduate or professional school immediately following their senior year.

A void in current research exists that fails to look at how students in liberal arts majors in the Humanities and Social Sciences chose their area of concentration. Given the fact that many students at liberal arts colleges find themselves asking, “what could I do with that major,” this study hopes to find how students come to ultimately answer that question (Jacobus & Pennsylvania State Dept, 1973).

Research surrounding the choice of major focuses on which students (based on race, gender, socio-economic status) pick certain majors, the reasons students cite for their choice, and the profitability of certain majors (Beggs et al., 2008; Cebula & Lopes, 1982; Goyette & Mullen, 2006; Horn & Zahn, 2001; Porter & Umbach, 2006; St. John, Hu, Simmons, Carter, & Weber, 2004; Thomas, 1985). This investigation questions the existence of a link between the undergraduate major and employment occupation, a connection commonly made in existing research. The studies cited above were all done at large universities that do not have a liberal arts emphasis. While this literature provides useful information on the motivating factors for major choice, it is based on the assumption that students will pursue a career in the field of their major. It is under this assumption that for example, all Educational Studies majors will pursue either a career in or a graduate degree in the field of Education (Freeman, 2008).

A significant number of quantitative studies have investigated which racial groups have historically mobilized towards certain majors. Consistent throughout these studies is that black students are more likely than white students to declare majors in the humanities, social sciences, and education (Goyette & Mullen, 2006; Horn & Zahn, 2001; Porter & Umbach, 2006; St. John et al., 2004). Based on a large-scale national research project on bachelor’s degree recipients, findings surface which suggest that Asian/Pacific Islanders are increasingly more likely than black and white student to major in engineering (Horn & Zahn, 2001). There are useful links that can be made between racial statistics of college students and their major, however it is not the only trend being studies.

Other studies which research the gender themes related to undergraduate majors find that men are more likely to
major in engineering, computer science, and business and that women are more likely to major in the Humanities, Social Sciences, and in the Arts (Horn & Zahn, 2001; Porter & Umbach, 2006). Women also tend to major in areas of study that have historically and traditionally been predominately female, such as the Humanities (Porter & Umbach, 2006). Yet similar to the racial studies conducted, the research connecting gender and major choice is not all encompassing, and does little to explain the experiences of students who make this important choice.

A strong connection has also been discovered which suggests that with increased socio-economic status for male students comes an increased likelihood to choose a business major (Leppel, Williams, & Waldauer, 2001). Additionally, Leppel et al. notes that with increased socio-economic status of female students comes increased likelihood for choice of the humanities and social sciences. While these findings are interesting, they speak to universities that cater to vocationally specific majors and which offer the most popular major in the country: business (Horn & Zahn, 2001). This study therefore also investigates the situation facing liberal arts college students: without engineering, nursing, and business majors, what are students majoring in?

As widespread as research is surrounding the type of student who levitates towards a certain major, an equal emphasis has been placed on the personal motivating factors behind these students’ choices (Beggs et al., 2008; Galotti, 1999). Men choose their major based on conceptions of advancement opportunities and monetary gain (Goyette & Mullen, 2006; Horn & Zahn, 2001; Leppel, 2001; Leppel et al., 2001). Conversely, women are more likely to choose a major not directly linked to a job and based on factors such as how interesting the job is and on job security (Leppel, 2001). Other gender related studies investigate the extent to which students select their major based on characteristics of the corresponding departments: teaching quality, reputation, course requirements, probability for receiving good grades, and student competitiveness (Cebula & Lopes, 1982). Yet these studies are based on large scale surveys and do not explain why for example, a department’s reputation is important to students.

Outside of gender, race, and socio-economic class, researchers focus on numerous factors that are wide in breadth. Other factors include a student’s perception of the content area and the difficulty of the major, the job characteristics potentially leading from that major, and students’ self-perception of their academic abilities (Cebula & Lopes, 1982; Leppel et al., 2001). Politically affiliated links have also been drawn relating to major choice, with findings surfacing that student with more liberal views are more likely than those with conservative views to choose a non-science major (Porter & Umbach, 2006). Substantial research also illustrates a clear argument that certain personality characteristics of students make them more likely to choose certain majors (Porter & Umbach, 2006). It is clear from the breadth of research that exists that there are numerous factors...
that both predict and influence a student’s choice of major.

The Liberal Arts Context

The liberal arts education has long been considered the “purest form of education” and that its most essential attribute is providing students with a wide-angled view of the world (Jacobus & Pennsylvania State Dept, 1973). As Goyette (2006) articulates, “training in the liberal arts is believed to strengthen a student’s character and to develop qualities such as reason, judgment, and a sense of social obligation...designed to prepare elite students with the qualities needed to govern” (p. 498). Equally important however is that while it is praised for its all-encompassing curriculum, “many students enter it without a clear idea of what it is and what be done with it” (Jacobus & Pennsylvania State Dept, 1973). This uncertainty experienced by students had yet to be researched in the context of choice of major, plans for graduate study, or career aspirations.

Nonetheless, researchers are far from reaching any sort of agreement on the subject. Some argue that liberal arts graduates are seen in the job market by employers as generalists and therefore lack specificity (Jacobus & Pennsylvania State Dept, 1973). In agreement with student’s perception of an apparent lack of connection between liberal arts majors and the job market, research points out that social sciences majors are in fact likely to be employed in occupations outside of their major, often in business environments (Horn & Zahn, 2001). From these it can be inferred that a liberal arts college enables various options for its graduates, yet can neglect them of a sense of defined occupational direction.

Limitations of the literature

Certain crucial questions still remain to be answered which have been largely left out of the current discourse on this subject. This study plans to gain an inside-look into the decision making process of liberal arts students in choosing their major. How close is the connection between the student’s major and their desired employment upon graduation from a liberal arts college? What personal challenges does the nature of liberal arts majors present to students? How confident are liberal arts graduates with their choice of major when entering the work force? Are employers attracted to liberal arts graduates who have not majored in a field of study closely related to the desired job?

Surprisingly little literature exists to answer an important question: what situation does the liberal arts education present to students in the selection of their major? How does the lack of non-vocationally linked majors affect students in their educational plans, both on the undergraduate and graduate level? While the reviewed findings are interesting, they speak predominately to universities that cater to vocationally specific majors and which offer the most popular major in the country, business (Horn & Zahn, 2001). The level of understanding on the student’s part, in relation to the structure of a liberal arts education has not yet been the study of scholarly research. By interviewing

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students at a small elite liberal arts institution like Cannon University, this study both examines how the students came to choose their major and their expectations upon entering this university of the liberal arts education.

Theoretical Framework

The factors and patterns surrounding a student’s choice of college major are numerous. However, many of these findings and related theories are based on the assumption that students pick a major related to a field in which they will ultimately be employed. The liberal arts education instead presents students with a wider-image of academia, and presses students to look beyond vocationally linked majors. Therefore the theoretical framework is necessitated by an applicability to all students, regardless of the size and academic focus of the institution which they attend or their educational plans.

The prevailing educational theory that provides useful insight into how college students choose their department of study and subsequent major is the Holland personality theory of person-environment fit (Allen & Robbins, 2008; Feldman et al., 2004; Miller & Miller, 2005; Pike, 2006; Porter & Umbach, 2006). Educational researcher John Holland formulized a theory that establishes a relationship between personality type, a person’s interaction with their environment, and their educational and vocational choices. The three governing assumptions of Holland’s theory are that “(1) people tend to choose environments compatible with their personality type; (2) environments tend to reinforce and reward different patterns of abilities and interests; (3) people tend to flourish in environments that are congruent with their dominant personality types” (Feldman et al., 2004, p. 528). It is concluded that students choose the college major and related department that is consistent with their personality (Miller & Miller, 2005).

According to Holland’s personality theory, people fall into one of six types: realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, and conventional (Miller & Miller, 2005). Best summarized by Tokar and Swanson (1995) are the following common observations relating to Holland’s six personality traits: Realistic: asocial, frank, practical; Investigative: analytical, complex, critical, reserved; Artistic: emotional, open, expressive; Social: cooperative, emphatic, patient; Enterprising: agreeable, energetic; Conventional: careful, conforming, conscientious. Holland’s personality theory has been applied to numerous fields of study including job field, and in higher education. The Porter (2006) study is crucial for applying the six personality traits to students’ choice of major. As summarized by Allen and Robbins (2008), the extensive study found that “students higher in investigative, lower in artistic, and lower in enterprising were more likely to choose a science major” (p. 63). The literature on Holland’s personality theory helps to establish a commonality between college students, and between the colleges themselves. The Holland personality theory implies that while students vary in their career aspirations and reasoning for choosing a given major, they can nonetheless be categorized by their personality, and
surveyed for important themes and trends. A student’s personality can then be juxtaposed to their educational choices, no matter how specific; as in this case it is students at a small elite liberal arts university.

In summary, Holland’s theory provides that based on students’ personality type their choice of major or vocation can be explained. The research that exists which further illustrates Holland’s personality theory fails to mention all but one of the researched contributing factors that have been mentioned in the review of the literature on major choice. As duly noted in the review of the literature, race and gender are both useful in predicting and explaining a student’s choice of major. The Holland theory has been applied to these parameters and was found to be “a useful lens through which to study racial and gender differences in student major choice” (Porter & Umbach, 2006, p. 433). However it does not directly address a student’s socio-economic status or plans for graduate and professional education. It is therefore the crucial role of this study to test Holland’s personality fit in the liberal arts context. In an environment that pushes students to explore as many departments as possible and to push academic norms to their limits to find new meanings, is Holland’s personality theory still relevant? Are students at liberal arts colleges strongly influenced by their own personality needs, so much to outweigh parental influence and monetary aspirations? All of these questions are addressed through qualitative research methods at the distinguished Cannon University.

Methods

The participants of this study are fellow peers of mine who are undergraduate students enrolled in the small, elite liberal arts institution Cannon University. This school is ranked amongst the top 20 liberal arts colleges in the United States according to the 2008 U.S News & World Report rankings of colleges. Made evident through materials distributed amongst prospective students, current attending students, and alumni Cannon University prides itself on the academic achievements of those who have passed through its doors. From the very first pages of the school’s academic handbook it is clear that the success of current students and alumni is largely attributed to Cannon’s richly diverse academic program, which “prepares students for many careers and life choices, including professions that require graduate school training.” The extensive array of fields that Cannon students enter, as the admissions officer happily listed for me, are both impressive in their scope and help maintain Cannon’s reputation as a leading undergraduate institution. These materials also address the focus of this research topic, that is the structure of its academic program. As the manual states, “it is structured to provide a well-rounded liberal education and to prepare students for graduate and professional schools.” Upon reading this catalogue, the focus on students entering schools of graduate and professional study becomes blatantly clear.

The nature of the majors offered is described as general education and serves students by urging them to take
advantage of the diversity of a liberal arts institution. By combining the two recurring themes that emerge from Cannon’s published materials, the academic structure and educational offerings of this school are designed to send students to pursue graduate degrees and to prepare them for a wide variety of occupations.

The three males and five females that were interviewed were all second-year students, while one other participant was a professor with an academic advising role, and the other an Assistant Dean of Admissions. All of the contributors have already declared their major and/or minor and are therefore asked to reflect on their selection process and their career aspirations and expectations in relation to this choice. This study was conducted on the campus of the liberal arts college that these students attend. Each of the participants selected the actual location of the interview themselves to ensure a comfortable setting and were aware of their rights as participants prior to the start of the questioning.

The research questions of this study are most appropriately answered by qualitative research methods. In examining how students experienced the major selection process at liberal arts colleges, it is necessary to get in the field and to be close to the participants (Patton, 2002). The goal of this type of investigation is to take me, as the researcher, into the minds of other students by interviewing them and to document with quotations, descriptions, and analysis someone else’s experiences (Patton, 2002). As I strived to get a complete view of the selection of major, the holistic perspective was important to maintain in that it ensures that the “qualitative inquirer gathers data on multiple aspects of the setting under study to assemble a comprehensive and complete picture of the social dynamic of the particular situation or program” (Patton, 2002, p. 59). With that said, qualitative research as a general investigative discipline is extremely broad, grounded on many principles and theories, and is widely applicable to various fields.

The phenomenological inquiry is what grounds this study. As Patton (2002) extensively describes, the approach of phenomenology looks directly at the lived experiences of participants to get a direct view of how they experienced it. The goal of the in-depth interviewing that this approach requires is to see how students analyze their choice of major “how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it” (Patton, p. 104). That is the very essence of this qualitative study. Closely related to the phenomenological approach, and beneficially complimenting is the heuristic inquiry (Patton, 2002). Such requirements for this type of investigation are the researcher having personally experienced the situation and for them to be intensely interested in the phenomenon (Patton). I experienced choosing a major in a liberal arts college and was interested in exploring the experiences of my peers. Therefore qualitative research served as the perfect avenue for finding the answers to my question. I was looking to explore how students choose their major out of the limited offerings at liberal arts colleges,
whether or not they struggled, and what their perceptions of their choice are and how this will affect them post-graduation. These are all reflective questions that I myself once considered and continue to ask.

The phenomenon that Patton (2002) describes was also found in the current literature. I was intensely driven by the fact that no literature currently exists which questions the link between undergraduate major and career path. My goal was therefore to challenge this academic norm, and to investigate my own notion that this link does not exist for students at liberal arts colleges (Palmer, 2006). This was in fact a “fundamental misunderstandings of the group under study,” both on the part of the literature and of the participants. However the extent to which this misunderstanding affected the students was only to be determined through interviews. Similar to what Palmer experienced in his study, the reviewed literature framed both my researcher identity and my research agenda. These were my influences to look further at the experiences and perceptions of fellow students in a similar situation as me. In direct relation to this is Patton’s (2002) explanation for heuristic inquiry:

The uniqueness of heuristic inquiry is the extent to which it legitimizes and places at the fore these personal experiences, reflections, and insights of the researcher. The researcher, then, comes to understand the essence of the phenomenon through shared reflection and inquiry... a sense of connectedness develops between the researcher and research participants in their mutual efforts to elucidate the nature, meaning, and essence of a significant human experience. (p. 108)

This is the specific method of theoretical tradition for which this inquiry is grounded. The significant educational decision of choosing an undergraduate major is in fact an ‘experience,’ and is therefore worth deconstructing for meaning and greater understanding, both on my part and on the part of the participants.

The importance of qualitative research to this study lies in the fact that it necessitates a close, hands-on approach to exploring the issue at hand (Patton, 2002). The philosophy behind qualitative research emphasizes that, as opposed to other methods, it holds immense value as a source of grounded theory (Patton). This theory, rather than being the result of surveys or laboratory work is derived from the real-world and the direct observations of researchers (Patton). Qualitative inquiry strives to examine the human experience holistically, and connects that which links us all: activities, behaviors, actions, interpersonal interactions, and organizational processes (Patton). These five categories transcend into all aspects of life and it is the job and purpose of qualitative inquiry to make sense of, shed light upon and accurately illustrate these for the reader.
As a result of the nature of this study, qualitative interviewing was the primary method of data collection. Initially I provided the same topics, subject areas, and questions to each of the participants to ensure a basic form of uniformity (Patton, 2002). As I continued my research at Cannon University, my interview questions changed to help ensure meaningful results. As I began to more clearly understand the group under study, new questions helped me to gather more data on what I thought I was observing as a theme and on what I had learned from the review of the literature (Agar, 1996).

The theme of strong parental influence emerged from my first five interviews, and therefore I directly asked all future participants the extent to which this influenced their choice of major. Early on in the interview process, second-year student Patrick mentioned how he is relying heavily on the reputable weight of the Cannon University diploma to assist him in graduate school entry and in the job market. This therefore became a question that I posed to all my participants, and was one of the main focuses of my interview with an Assistant Dean of Admissions. This question was not easily answered by all participants, as it asked them to juxtapose realistic pressures like academic performance, extracurricular involvement, and graduate school entrance exams to that which many students take for granted, their actual diploma. Discussing the complexity and challenge of loaded questions, Coles (1997) articulates the precise affects of such a question: “questions that have moral implications are harder to hear, are not so easy to answer, and, for any of us, persist long after they have been asked” (p. 51). However only a certain amount of planning and preparation can help to ensure a successful interview, marked by informative and useful responses. It was ultimately the probes and follow-up questions that were the most vital to this research as they prompted the participant for a deeper, more thorough answer than that which was first given (Patton).

Data Collection Methods

Each interview was transcribed and attached to basic demographic information about the participant: sex, age, class year, hometown, and race. Immediately following each interview, extensive notes were taken that reviewed how I interacted with the participants, how they reacted to my questioning, what the feel of the environment was, the quality of the questioning and response, and any and all thoughts. Most helpful was to simply write everything down, even that which did not seem immediately relevant. As Patton importantly denotes, the immediate time following an interview is the first stages of analysis.

Inductive analysis was used to discover themes from within the interview transcripts (Patton, 2002). This inductive method involved looking for themes related to certain key phrases regarding a student’s choice of major. Answers that began with “I thought that the major,” “I was confused by, I was frustrated by,” and “when I graduate” were all indicators of important emerging themes. As is done with
preexisting literature and research, the interview transcripts were coded for what Patton defines as "patterns, themes, categories, and typologies" (p. 462). This involved reading the individual transcripts several times before marking anything, and then defining certain responses by a categorical denotation. For example, all participant responses that included the notion that students were unsure of how their major would apply to their occupation, the code "major-vocational link" was applied. At the end of each transcript a summary and review of the important data was included in order to allow for efficient referencing of the interviews.

As a second-year student less than half way through my undergraduate academic career, I asked myself at the start of this research inquiry why anyone would take me seriously. I have neither conducted large-scale research in any sense nor do I have the credentials of an established researcher. Touching on this search for researcher identity, Agar (1996) approaches the problem from both angles. Just as bias must be removed from the study, this skill is something that is acquired with time and with experience. With that said, it was even more crucial for me to establish who I am as a fellow student to my participants and to explain what I want to do (Agar). In addition, I found it to be beneficial to share with my participants some of the literature research I had conducted, and of several themes that have emerged from already completed interviews. By doing this I had deliberately grasped a hold of the participant’s attention, interest in the topic, and had set the bar for the type of answers that were most meaningful to my research, the most useful for my final paper, and the most personally rewarding for the interviewee’s own reflection of the major selection process (Delgado-Gaitan, 1993).

In order to maintain a sense of comfort during interviews, it was imperative to present myself as a fellow student and not as an outsider. My attitude going into the interviews was equally as important as the questions being asked, as it framed for the participants my method, style, and position for inquiry (Coles, 1997). In that case, I was both being honest and presenting myself in a purposeful way that would make sense to my participants (Agar, 1996). However being honest needed to be regulated.

As a researcher, no matter how much of an insider I was, I could not affect the participants’ responses during interviews. When conducting research as an ethnographer, having the same ethnic background as those being studied does not place the researcher at a definite advantage (Delgado-Gaitan, 1993). The same can be said for this research project, as being a fellow student of the participants does not make me “more knowledgeable about the meanings of the participants’ feelings, values, and practices” (Delgado-Gaitan, p. 391). Therefore it was crucial to completely refrain from any of my own personal struggles with choosing a major and to remain open to the various experiences that interviewees shared with me. It was most difficult to avoid probing my participants in a way that affirmed my own presumptions about the topic. As a part of the discipline of qualitative
research, all of these tactics employed by insider researchers are used to produce meaningful and accurate results, and not to, as one may assume, to conduct neutral research (Delgado-Gaitan, 1993). What is instead important to monitor is how the biases that I have as an insider heuristic researcher affect my research; to see if they jolt into awareness, slowly emerge, or lurk unrecognized (Agar).

It was this sense of openness that allowed me to investigate further some of the patterns and themes that emerged from my interviews that may have otherwise been ignored. The struggles I experienced with choosing a major were, as I found, not by any means unanimously felt by all of the students whom I interviewed at Cannon University. As this became immediately clear upon starting the interview process, the most important thing was to not dwell on what I expected to find, as “the more you cling to them, the less you will understand about the people with whom you work” (Agar, 1996, p.100). In fact, several of the students expressed that they felt that anyone could find something of interest to study and declare as their major at Cannon University, and that the non-vocationally linked areas of concentration posed little problems to their selection. This was both a shock to me as the insider researcher, and a major finding. As is recommended by established qualitative researchers, I strived diligently to understand my participants and what they were telling me, and to explain to myself what these themes meant to my larger research questions (Coles, 1997).

Part of understanding my participants was assessing their level of understanding of the research topic and related information. By not pushing the participants to elaborate on any frustration or discontent with the majors offered by Cannon University that for many does not exist at all, I was not only remaining ethically just, but was also avoiding “exploiting the researched and constructing the researched as ‘falsely conscious’” (Palmer, 2006, p. 482). Many of the students were in fact well aware of what a liberal arts education entails prior to their enrolling at Cannon. Even more telling was that several students recognized that the undergraduate major only plays a small role in future career and academic plans. As Palmer cautions, I found a very small presence of a false consciousness amongst the participants regarding the limited correlation between undergraduate liberal arts degrees and future career and educational goals. Upon realizing that many students were in fact content with Cannon’s concentration offerings and were also aware of the meaning and structure of a liberal arts degree, I began to view my own experiences as an outlier. While my status as a fellow student did not change throughout the research process, I separated my experiences from those being described by the participants. This trend is common in qualitative research as Patton (2002) describes, and is echoed accurately by Palmer’s own experiences: “I began to detach my experiences from their experiences and in the process realized that, while the students and I shared some similar life experiences, we were different in many ways” (p. 490).

While I am not a seasoned researcher, my proximity to the research
topic and my ability to be reflexive all legitimize my qualitative work (Agar, 1996; Patton, 2002). Palmer (2006) defines the insider researcher as someone who shares common language, experiences, and themes with participants of their study. These elements are both the foundation of my insider status, and the inspiration for this study. Are there any similarities of experiences, or recurring themes between people of the same language and background at Cannon University, in relation to their choice of major? Yet the researcher’s identity goes beyond background and language, and extends into approach and manner.

My voice as a researcher was crucial and involved balancing between being a fellow student and a fellow student trying to accomplish a research inquiry. This was a balance between being “credible, authoritative, authentic, and trustworthy” and being another student engaging in a regular conversation (Patton, 2002, p. 65). As a student enrolled in the same liberal arts institution as the participants of the study, I am both an insider researcher and a trustworthy investigator. The credentials are two-fold. My proximity to the study ensures that the work is in fact first hand and directly observed, and my genuine personal investment and interest in the research questions is what makes me worthy.

My immediacy to the setting of the research and to the participants is what grounds not only my interviews, but my analysis of the data and my conclusions and implications. My background as a white, middle-class male student at the predominately white Cannon University is the “initial framework against which similarities and differences in the studied groups are assessed” (Agar, 1996, p. 93). How do the influencing factors of other ethnically similar students compare to those that led me to a major in Educational Studies? I began to ask, and to research the effects of being white on the flexibility one has in changing majors, and to see whether or not my ethnic background allowed me to choose between the natural sciences, the humanities, and the social science divisions. While the literature provided somewhat satisfying answers to my questions, these larger questions pave the road for valuable future research on this topic.

**Findings**

The section focuses on the major themes that emerged from the interviews and from the documents. These included official Cannon University materials that are made available to students in the Office of Admissions, and the Handbook to Academic Advisers which faculty receive as a guidebook for advising students throughout their undergraduate careers. From the data analysis several major themes emerged: motivation through interest, performance, graduate school plans, major applicability, the value of the diploma received, and study abroad requirements.

In an effort to explore the major selection process for different students at Cannon University, students were not individually picked given their potential value to this study. Three males and five female second-year students were randomly selected for participation in
this research project. All of these students had already declared their primary major at the time of the interview, were either 19 or 20 years of age, and were actively enrolled students at Cannon University.

In addition, one professor with additional academic advising responsibilities was interviewed, as was an Assistant Dean of Admissions from the Office of Admissions at Cannon University. The emerging themes are discussed here.

Amanda: “It wasn’t interesting enough to keep me motivated”

Of the eight interviews that were conducted with students, each participant noted interest as a strong motivator in their choice of major. Geology major Amanda described at length how her waning interest in her courses triggered her switch from taking International Relations and Political Sciences courses to the major she ultimately declared. She as well as several other participants noted that many of their academic interests that flourished in high school either did not meet their expectations at Cannon University or proved to be not engaging. While many Advanced Placement history courses are taught out of the textbook and heavily emphasize dates, facts, memorization, and document analysis, courses at Cannon University were taught differently. Amanda went on describe her experiences with Political Science, “I just lost interest basically, I felt that the work load wasn’t worth it, it was just too hard, and it was like I was working more for the grade more than anything else.”

Expressing similar concerns about the nature of her courses at Cannon, Neuroscience major Kendra told me that while she always wanted to be a History major due to her life-long interest in the subject, “when I finally took a history class, it was really really different from what I thought it was going to be. The focus was a lot different. I definitely thought, like wow, this is not what I want to do.”

This was yet another example of how the style of the course being taught and the materials being covered caused students to explore outside of the department which they had initially thought would be their major field of study. Across all of the interviews that were conducted for this study, students quickly identified their interest in their major as a strong motivator for their choice.

Paul: “If I had had a poor performance, that may have stopped me from going into that major”

Through much of the interview process the subject of performance was repeatedly brought up on the part of the participant. Several students cited their grades as motivational factors for continuing with courses in a particular department. Similar to the quote above, other students like Paul inferred that had they not performed well in certain courses they would not peruses that academic area for their major. Kendra also described how her introductory Neuroscience professor encouraged her by telling her that she was “doing really well in the class,” and that naturally she should investigate it as her major.
Sociology and Anthropology major Candice provided the following answer for how she decided upon her concentration, “It was the one I did better in.”

While the connection between interest and performance is clear, it is a significant finding that students are equally motivated by the two in reference to their choice of undergraduate concentration. In several cases, satisfactory grades in courses can encourage students like Candice to further investigate that field of study.

Candice: “I don’t know, maybe graduate school. Not sure what I want to do”

The most consistent finding from all of the student interviews was an expectancy to enter graduate school upon graduation from Cannon University. However, there was a nearly unanimous uncertainty about the specific type of degree that is being sought by students, in addition to a wide variety of reasoning that was provided. With the exception of French major Jessica who has concrete plans to enter law school upon graduation and Neuroscience major Adam who is working directly towards medical school, all other six student participants are unclear of the details of their future plans. Sociology and Anthropology major Daniel said in an interview that he plans to go to graduate school, but when asked for the nature of the degree he is seeking, he said “I’m not exactly sure, I haven’t really been informed.” During my interview with Paul, his idea of continued graduate and professional education was even more vague, citing that law school was a possibility, but in general “I’m not sure about that.” Second year students Amanda and Kendra both reiterated this uncertainty about the specifics of the graduate degree that they seek, but were both confident that this degree was both necessary for success, and a personal goal and requirement.

While Kendra laughed at the question of what type of graduate schools she was looking at, Amanda elaborated that “my entire family and everyone [I] have know have all at least gotten their masters.” Her motivations for seeking the graduate degree are evidently clear, however in relation to the nature of her future studies, “That’s still up in the air, but I just know I should probably get [a] masters at the least.” Compared to the literature reviewed, this finding is significant in that none of the current discourse on the distinct motivating factors of major choice rate the seeking of a graduate degree high on a student’s agenda. However taking an additional look at Cannon University’s student catalogue, this parallel is clear: “it [academic offering] is structured to provide a well-rounded liberal education and to prepare students for graduate and professional schools.” This mission statement proves to be both effective in its purpose, yet provides little direction for students.

Amanda: “I knew that she would have been really upset if I were one those kids who were like, “I want to major in art and music””

The influence of parents on a student’s choice of major is clear in both the literature and in my findings.
However the extent of the influence of the persuasion is vastly different in magnitude. While the reviewed studies found similar conclusions, the percentage of participants that cited the influence of their parents in choosing their academic concentration was significantly lower than that which was found through this study (Beggs, 2008; Chung & Others, 1996). These studies noted 4% of participants citing their parents as an influence, while every one of the student in this study mentioned that they were to some degree influenced by them.

As students expressed to a certain extent that they looked for real-world applicability in their majors, many did elaborate extensively on the fact that their parents were concerned about whether or not their major would be useful. Kendra presented two conflicting arguments that her parents gave to her, further highlighting the feeling that students get regarding how important the choice of major is: “My parents have always told me that I should do something first and foremost that I enjoy” but that they were also saying “you need to get a degree in something that is going to be useful to you in the real world”. For this particular student, this duality led her to change from a Psychology concentration to Neuroscience, as she felt that that it was perceived as more challenging by employers and was more “specialized”.

As an academic advisor in the Educational Studies department, Professor Brittany Roland confirmed what the students were describing, saying that student are “very constrained by their parents... the parents are the biggest opposers to educational studies... they say I didn’t spend all this money on your education for you to go out and become a teacher.”

While Daniel seems to have plans of directly integrating his Sociology and Anthropology major into future work, he discussed that he in several ways agrees with some of the hesitations his parents have expressed with his major choice. As he explains, “my parents think the Sociology and Anthropology major is not really a useful major, like there’s nothing, not a big market for that type of education that you get, very specialized.” His tone and demeanor during this part of the interview strongly suggested that he found truth in this assumption about the perceived usefulness of his major, but soon after reassured that “I’m interested in it. So it more fits my interest right now, and I’ll figure out later on the [nature of] work.” Again he emphasizes the importance of interest in his subject, but in connection with the lack of clarity he has about future work plans or continued education, he may in fact benefit from academic and career advising, assisting with paths that he hasn’t “really been informed” about.

Looking at how this study came to be through my own struggles with my parents and myself switching from a Biology and pre-med student to an Educational Studies major, second-year Paul mirrored my major choice process the most closely. Like many other students, Paul entered Cannon with little to no idea of what he was going to major in, other than it “wasn’t going to be science or one of the regular sciences”. Through his first-year seminar course and the ability to explore numerous
departments early on in his undergraduate academic career, Political Science emerged as something that “sounded interesting, a little bit more relevant to the world [than English], and the job market, but more hard knowledge, what actually goes on”. In comparison to his second major English, Political Science was the most useful major in both his own eyes and in those of his parents. In reference to the influence and reactions of his parents, “I will admit that my dad really didn’t like the idea of being an English major. He actually had a hard time accepting the whole liberal arts program in general”. As a result he says that he took more Political Science courses, telling his father about “the more real world stuff”, but nonetheless encountered resistance in reference to his other English interests as his father “was trying to convince me that the English major wasn’t applicable”.

Paul’s experiences with choosing a major and his summary of the influences that steered him in the direction he took stand out as an outlier in this study. While my own experiences led me to investigate if this was in fact the norm on Cannon’s campus, the interview process in its entirety showed this to instead be a singular occurrence. However the misunderstanding that Paul’s father expressed about the liberal arts program is an additional avenue that was explored in this study.

Daniel: “I kind of knew that most liberal arts colleges had the humanities and the sciences”

From the review of the literature it is clear that a gap exists in research that evaluates students’ understanding of the structure of a liberal arts curriculum prior to the start of their undergraduate education. As is noted in Cannon University’s faculty guide to academic advising, during the summer of transition between high school and college students receive a plethora of course-related materials that they are largely left on their own to discern through. However a pre-first-year academic advisor is available to assist with questions, although this guidance is done through either telephone conversation or e-mail. The student and parents themselves do the initial course selection process on their own, and are then offered more personal advising through the First-year Seminar Program upon their arrival as first year students. Looking to explore the major selection process in an all-encompassing major, I then sought to explore whether or not students understood what a liberal arts education meant in terms of academic offerings and requirements for graduation.

None of the students expressed that they were completely surprised by the structure of academic programs at Cannon University. Assistant Dean of Admissions, Kimberly Ringhart provided that “a lot of people who come visit are already self selecting whether they are looking for a school that has more vocationally geared majors or they really understand what liberal arts is all about.” In accordance with her remarks the students whom I interviewed reiterated this referenced understanding of the liberal arts curriculum, many saying that they only visited this type of college during the college selection process.
Mathematical Economics major Morgan said “Yeah, I wanted that. I knew about the CORE curriculum.” Cannon’s CORE set of courses consists of two specific required classes that students must take by the end of their second-year, in addition to one course in both the Scientific Perspective and the Culture areas.

Morgan was not alone in her understanding and contempt with the CORE requirements with several other students emphatically lauding the parameters. When comparing the liberal arts university to those without similar requisites, Kendra provided that “I knew about ours [CORE curriculum] at least…I think it’s a good idea, but I definitely think its better to have these than to have just general education requirements. I like what we have”. Also aware of the foundations of a liberal arts college, Paul said that he does not at all feel constrained by the requirements and that “I actually thought that the CORE requirements here [Cannon] were less strict than the other schools I looked at”. A clear understanding of a liberal arts education sheds light upon the general satisfaction that students express with the academic offerings at Cannon University, however this in it of itself is a significant finding given research that suggests students have little idea about what to do with a liberal arts degree (Jacobus & Pennsylvania State Dept, 1973). Students do in fact seem to have at the very least a basal idea of what to do with their liberal arts degree, and as some like Alexander noted, “majoring in the liberal arts gives you so many different classes that we all know a little about. It gives you everything”.

Candice: “I wasn’t looking for something specific to a certain vocational field. I’ll figure it out eventually.”

While it is expected that not all students have a concrete idea of what they want to do with their futures, several students expressed that they were pleased with the non-vocational link of Cannon’s major offerings. This comfort in uncertainty about in what direction to take future learning or by what career path to explore emerged as a theme from many of the interviews across all academic disciplines. Kendra explained that the undergraduate degree “primes you for what your interests are, what you’re going to focus on as an adult in your career”. Daniel echoed this point by saying that “the major is kind of a base”, as did Candice in saying that “I’m not sure what I want to do with my future”, and therefore does not view the major as a commitment to a certain job or future area of study.

Expressing a preference for the variety of majors that do not prepare students for one particular line of work, Morgan said that “I kind of like that. I don’t know what I want to do at this point so I find that it helps me to explore. I can go into more fields with economics rather than something more specific, and then only to find out that I actually don’t like it.” The value of this statement lies in the fact that her Mathematical Economics major is perhaps one of the more specialized offerings at Cannon, yet she still views it as a launch pad for a host of different careers. This response and others shows that the students at Cannon utilize the
school’s major offerings in a way that prepares them for any field of work, allows them the option to enter any number of graduate schools, and is not restricting in that it does not limit them early on for careers they are unsure of the specifics of.

Kimberly Ringhart: “having the Cannon degree is definitely a big factor for a lot of people out there in the work force.”

Internationally known as a leading liberal arts institutions that prides itself in its emphasis on undergraduate research opportunities, state of the art resources, and a hugely successfully alumni base; Cannon University students know that they are at an advantage when it comes to future aspirations. As Assistant Dean of Admissions Kimberly Ringhart attested to in the quote above, the Cannon University diploma does in fact weigh heavily in many hiring situations in the work force. What emerged as a theme was students relying on the importance and weight of the ‘Cannon diploma’, which in some cases neutralized the students’ concerns of future plans. When asked if not having a specific Business related major would impede her entrance into top Business schools, Morgan replied that “no, coming form Cannon I don’t think so. Having a Cannon degree matters more.”

With clearly defined plans to enter Medical school upon graduation, Neuroscience major Alexander happily noted that “the fact that you graduated from Cannon says a lot”. Paul not only laughed at the fact that he is hoping that the Cannon diploma will give him an edge over others when it comes time for graduate school applications, but also explained that “if I had gone to one of my safety schools, I would feel less pressure in order to go on to really make something of myself, or make as much money”. For students like Paul and Morgan, a balance is being maintained between being academically successful and relying on the prestige of their undergraduate education to advance them further in both academia and the professional world.

Morgan: “[going abroad] was my main motivation for the major.”

A completely unexpected finding that emerged from this study was the influence of study abroad course requirements on a student’s choice of major. With plans to attend Law School following graduation, French major Jessica provided that her choice of major was nearly entirely a result of her plans to study abroad. Her parents had strongly encouraged her to study oversees for her entire Junior year, just as they did, and therefore she says “I decided to major in French because I knew I was good at it and I knew I wanted to go abroad”. She also noted that having previous high school experience with French has aided her in receiving good grades in French, and also recognized that law schools look closely at academic performance when considering students for admissions.

Mathematical Economics major Morgan described that her changing from a German and Economics double major to one concentration in the latter field of study was solely based on her not
being accepted to a study abroad program. After taking several German courses, she viewed the major as the natural course of action to take, but “I’m not going abroad anymore... If I was going abroad I would only need two more classes for the major, so why not?” For both of these participants the study abroad programs that Cannon offers, an option that 68% of its students exercise, provided a form of motivation for them to pick a certain concentration and additionally served as a long-term advisor in that the programs dictate specifically which courses a student is required to take in order to be eligible for acceptance.

Amanda: “I can definitely see parts of it [major] in my everyday life.”

These findings suggest that students have a substantial understanding of what the liberal arts education entails and that they are not generally concerned about competing with student from more specialized universities. However there exists a lack of unity between students on the ability to, or level of understanding related to, applying one’s field of study to graduate education or the work force.

Sociology and Anthropology major Daniel said that while the specific major one chooses is not extremely crucial to their success, it differs by department:

“It depends on what kind of major you’re into. If you’re into like Biology or Chemistry or Pre-med stuff, you’re pretty much set on where to go. But others like humanities, like Education, you can do whatever”.

The physical science majors that Daniel are referring to affirm his presumption that they have a clear direction of where to go. Neuroscience major Alexander who told of life-long plans to be a doctor detailed clear plans of what courses he was going to take at Cannon in following with Medical school requirements, and also about hopes of becoming a neurosurgeon. He explained that his major was a natural fit because six out of the eight courses that Medical schools require undergraduates to take are included in the Neuroscience concentration. Shedding light upon his peers with less concrete future plans, Alexander answered the question of how important one’s choice of major is by saying:

“I don’t think its that important, well if your going to graduate school I don’t think it’s important at all. If you are not going to graduate school, then I guess it is more important because it shows what you are specializing in. But even though I don’t think any major looks bad”

With little direction in future plans and only the knowledge that she should “probably get [a] masters at the least”, Amanda’s also displayed a limited understanding of what role Geography would play in her job later on. While she did suggest, as quoted above that she can see her major playing a role in her everyday life, her understanding seemed to be a work in progress:

“I know I can take it into a million different direction if I want. But I still really haven’t given too much though about it, and no one really has told me what business there is for it, but I don’t know. All I know is that I’ve been told
“don’t worry, you’ll be fine,” and that’s enough for me to be “all right, ill choose this”.

Although these students were diverse in their thoughts of the level of importance of major by subject area and attendance in graduate schools, some participants were able to draw direct connections between their major and what they aspire to do in the future. Paul broke down his two majors: “I think they’re both helpful [with law school entrance]. English is thinking abstractedly, and applying knowledge in writing. And political science has to do with law on a larger scale.” Morgan was confident in her choice of Mathematical Economics for not only entrance into Business school, but also because “especially because of our current times, I think it’s really important and useful to understand what’s going on in the world”. While Morgan related her major to current events, Kendra specifically said that her switch from a Psychology major to Neuroscience “gives you a lot more opportunities to do different kinds of research and it opens more doors” based on the fact that “you get a lot more of the cellular and the scientific aspect...gives you a lot more opportunities”.

A lack of understanding persists amongst students regarding how or if their major will relate to their future job plans. While certain physical science majors are well on the path to Medical school, others are uncertain about in what direction to take their studies. The issues regarding the push towards graduate schools is expanded in this finding as students are unclear about if continuing onto higher degree programs is either connected to or necessitated by specific majors that these schools do or do not seek.

Kendra: “I have a good relationship with my advisor, he’s also my professors, I feel comfortable talking to him.”

As part of the interview process, students were asked to reflect upon the nature of academic advising that they have received thus far as a second-year student. All participants who were asked this question noted that they have a positive relationship with their academic advisor, and in many cases these faculty have encouraged them to go in specific directions when it comes time for course selection. It is clear from the interview data that the type of advising that occurred was all based on course selection, and not on career planning or exploration.

Paul reflected on a lasting impression left by his advisor who said that “if there’s an interesting course and taking that will stop me from fulfilling requirements for the second major, I should take the interesting course”. Both Amanda and Kendra saw their advisor as a tool for future job connections, recommendation writing and for the scholarly contributions to their field. Amanda elaborated on the advising process by saying that “at the end I need to have the advisor with the most prestige, because if it came to writing letters of recommendation or even for like hiring me, that definitely weighed in”.

The limited nature and productivity from the advising that occurs at Cannon University is a major
finding in that it helps to explain the wide variety of topics that were left open by students in this research inquiry. Uncertainty about the applicability of their majors, the type of graduate school they hope to attend, the integration of their major to different job fields, and options for employment immediately following graduation are all facets of the undergraduate education that if informed about, can help students start taking a more in-depth and educated look at their goals and aspirations.

In many aspects the findings closely mirror the overarching theme of the literature review: assortment. Just as scholars have provided numerous reasons and motivations for students choosing their major, my data also shows a wide variety of reasons that affect this choice. While the findings do differ from those of the scholarly research that has already been done, it is vital to consider the larger implications that result from students having such varied experiences.

**Conclusion**

**Discussion**

To fully understand and to grasp the importance of the findings of this study it is imperative that the context be brought back into the specific setting of the liberal arts university. The review of the literature frames the results of this qualitative study appropriately as it left me with many questions regarding the college major choice at a liberal arts college, and also eager to see if from the data there would emerge similar conclusions that the host of established educational researchers have found. Most probing was the conclusion made by Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) which stated that not only is the college major a crucial choice that students must make, but that it also plays a consistent role in one’s career path. In the specific language of Cannon University, I looked towards the school's published literature for a more localized framework of the study using all of Cannon’s official documentation surrounding the undergraduate major. In summary from reviewing materials from both the Admissions office publications and Career Services booklets, it is factual to conclude with two findings: students at Cannon University are being prepared to enter graduate school and that ultimately, many of them are extremely successful in an outstanding array and plethora of careers and industries. It is in this context that the findings are discussed.

Leading back to the motivation for this research endeavor, I find it hugely significant that upon entering the university, students were all aware of the nature of the majors offered at Cannon. As opposed to the frustration I felt when looking to find a major that I could immediately see being useful in the job market, the student participants did not echo this feeling. Several even said that they enjoyed the non-vocational majors because it helped them to explore various fields of study. They felt that the 51 majors that are offered to students at Cannon have the ability to serve all students no matter their interests or career goals. The largest issues were not they could not find a major that suited their interests and expectations, rather that they could not say how or if the major was important to their overall success.
In relation to the literature that exists on student choice of major, these findings also hold sizable importance. The void that I noted which exists is in part filled by this study. None of the current research goes as far as to question if there is always a direct link between undergraduate major and career. However these findings prove that students at liberal arts colleges understand that they will not necessarily enter the work field in a position related to their major, and that as opposed to the reviewed literature, this does not decide in what direction their life will lead. The research surrounding gender is also challenged in this study given that neither males nor females cited advantages that their major holds for future career advancement opportunity as a significant motivating factor (Goyette & Mullen, 2006; Horn & Zahn, 2001; Leppel, 2001; Leppel et al., 2001). Connectedly it should be reiterated that most participants did not know the nature of the careers they are seeking.

There are several consistencies in the findings that highlight the influential factors for students choosing their major: hoping to enter graduate school upon graduation, influence and pressure from parents, and motivation by interest in the field of study. This alone is significant in that while they clearly stand out as significant findings due to the amount that students discussed them, none of the reviewed literature focused on such parameters. While this may be due to the fact that motivation through interest and parental influence seem like obvious influencing factors, they are important parts of the decision making process that have played a significant part in how and why students declare the major that they do.

The importance of the results lays in the variety of answers that I received from students on why they ultimately chose their major and what led them to this decision. The spread was huge: performance, vagueness of the major, applicability of the major, usefulness for research, law school admissions, medical school requirements, ability, study abroad requirements, the market value of the Cannon diploma, parents, advisors, faculty. The sheer number of factors that influence a student’s choice is outstanding, as were their varying levels of understanding regarding key issues. Significant educational choices and life goals held hugely different importance for each student, as did their clarity of what they mean. While every student expressed interest in graduate school, the reasons for doing so spread from concrete life goals to vague perceptions of its importance. The assortment of responses that students provided is extremely telling as to how for many this is an extremely difficult decision that represents the culmination of countless aspects of their life-long educational experiences.

Just as the broad selection of motivating factors is significant, this entire study is important because it shows that most students have never been asked to reflect on the path that led them to their major. During the interview process I would often hear from my peers that “that’s a very interesting question” when I asked them to evaluate exactly how important the decision is to their education and to their career goals. Additionally, when
observing the student providing answers in the interviews it was evident that they were developing their answers as the interview went on. Several of them would think of additional comments to one question while in the process of answering a completely different one. Therefore it is my conclusion that the overwhelming importance of the findings is that there is a huge inconsistency in how students are being advised. They are told that the undergraduate major is important, but not told in what way or given concrete recommendations for evaluating their choices and decision.

Implications

As stated in the introduction, this qualitative study has not only the ability to inform educators, but also students. By reflecting on the major choice process that has evidently been influenced by a large number of angles in their lives, they can start to develop answers to larger question. It was clear that many students were left after the interview to begin to answer, for example, “why do I want to go to graduate school, and to study what?” Several participants approached me in passing days after the interview and told me that they thought our conversation reminded them to start thinking about summer internship plans, and to reach out to their advisors and career services about planning for the coming years. The findings are important as they closely and accurately depict the uncertainty that students have about their future plans, and about the role that their undergraduate education plays in achieving these goals.

College is a critical time for students, and a privilege that many students are not given the opportunity to experience. As a result it is expected that as high-achieving learners, we begin to forget about why we are in school. The findings show that many of us have only a faint idea of where we can and want to proceed academically and vocationally. While I am not suggesting that students have a firm idea at all times of what they want to do with their lives, I am suggesting that this type of conversation should be facilitated before senior year when interviews begin for jobs and applications are filled for graduate schools.

This therefore brings me to the overarching goal of this discussion. This research must be read by each of the individuals that students cited as people who led them to their choice. Professors should be informed that when they compliment a student on their performance in a class, they in some instances are encouraging them to major in that field. Conversely, when professors present material in entry-level courses that does not have even a basal connection to material covered in high school classes, they are discouraging students from proceeding further in that subject area. Administrators should and can be informed through this research that when they advertise Cannon University as a prestigious liberal arts college that serves to prepare students for graduate and professional studies, students are not given reasons as to why or in what fields they should continue their education. Lastly and most significantly, academic advisors must know that their role has the ability to
have an enormous influence and informative role in a student’s choice of their undergraduate field of study. By not providing this role to students, they are in turn prohibiting their students from being told about certain key aspects of the liberal arts education that can make their major choice both easier and better informed.

Suggestions

“The academic adviser can help in the process of declaration by discussing with the students the relationship of the concentration program both to the Cannon curriculum as well as to the academic interests of the individual students.”

-Cannon University handbook to academic advising

As I think back upon how I switched from hoping to be a pre-med Biology major to an Educational Studies concentrator, I reflect on information that I was told along the way. In a career services workshop, I was told that graduates from Cannon University are prospering and succeeding in every job field and are highly valued for the rigorous education that they received as an undergraduate. During an Educational Studies informational luncheon, several faculty informed me that graduates from their department go on to not only be teachers, but have entered the Business field, financial services, health-care, and law professions to name only a few. At an alumni networking event I was told by several graduates that when it comes to graduate school applications, academic performance and grade point average are considered to be hugely more important to admissions officers than the particular major the student choice. These were all extremely crucial experiences that helped me realize that being an Educational Studies major did not guarantee that I would become a teacher, or prevent me from receiving a higher level of education in a different discipline. Central to reviewing these experiences is that none of this information came from my academic advisor.

The faculty advisor that students at liberal arts colleges are assigned to upon entering the university must begin to facilitate the type of informed discussions that occurred throughout this qualitative study. They should inform students that exploring different departments is a way of exploring and sparking one’s interests. First-years should be afforded the knowledge early on that the undergraduate major does not define their career path, nor does it predetermine what type of graduate education they can pursue. Academic advisors should have more than one or two schedule appointments with each of their advisees in order to play a more useful and constructive role in their student’s academic lives. All of the conflicts that the participants in this study described could have been discussed and resolved in an educated manner with the help of their advisers. Career services events and department luncheons should not serve as the main arena for which students learn under which parameters and guidelines they should choose their major. The academic advisor is a universal tool that all
students are given, and specifically in the liberal arts setting, should be used to its fullest extent by actively exploring the ever-changing interests, thoughts, and questions that new college students have.

In order to substantiate this suggestion future research should be done to more closely examine the role that advisors play in informing students about their academic options. Specifically in the liberal arts context, this research can explore how important faculty feel their role as an advisor is, and to see if they understand the influence that they have upon students choosing their major. In doing so these faculty members can also be shown more evidence which necessitates that their role become more useful and informative for students. An additional avenue for future qualitative research is to explore students’ perceptions of their academic advisors. This can help inform administrators of whether or not the academic advisor is the most effective tool for students, and will perhaps facilitate discussions on suggestions for how the liberal arts university can better inform the student body about all aspects of their undergraduate majors.

Limitations

The most significant limitation of this research is its scope. By qualitatively examining more of the student body, some of the other aspects that emerged from the review of the literature could be reviewed to see if they hold applicability in the liberal arts context. Surveying students on a larger scale for trends in race, class, and gender could show if for example, the race related findings of Horn and Zahn (2001) or Goyette and Mullen (2006) still hold true at liberal arts colleges. Additionally limited by the size and scope of the survey was the opportunity to test Holland’s theory of personality-fit. As Porter (2006) explored the link between six personality types and the majors that those students choose, without more time and resources this project could not fully investigate this theory’s applicability to institutions like Cannon University.
Bibliography


