

Finding the Fit: Undergraduate Identity and Career Pathways

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Abstract

This study examines how identity shapes undergraduate students' major choice, career development, and post-graduate pathways. While professionals are working to diversify, they still lack a clear understanding of how social and cultural identity influence economic outcomes such as major choice, access to opportunities, and career trajectories. Findings aim to inform educators, students, and employers seeking to strengthen career development support and improve transitions into the workforce. With our data, we can pursue avenues to help diversify different professions and destroy the barriers holding undergraduate students back.

Using survey data, our research explores patterns in major choice, career preparation experiences, and perceived support to better understand inequities in professional pathways. The survey questions are not based on a particular hypothesis but rather meant to reveal patterns that can explain why undergraduates do or do not make choices in their careers. To garner data, our team built a survey using Qualtrics, based on a foundational survey geared toward professionals in established career paths, created by our research mentor, Dr. Zimmerman, and her team. Survey responses were analyzed using descriptive and comparative methods to identify patterns, inequities, and differences between groups. Thus far, we were able to have 180 complete responses to our survey from undergraduate students at 102 different institutions across the US. Results revealed patterns in major choice related to social identity.

Objectives

- To examine how social and cultural identity influence undergraduate students' academic major selection.
- To identify patterns in career preparation experiences (e.g., internships, mentoring, networking) across identity groups.
- To explore differences in perceived institutional and social support related to career development.
- To analyze how identity relates to post-graduate plans and career aspirations.
- To uncover potential inequities in professional pathways among undergraduate students.
- To generate data that can inform educators, institutions, and employers in strengthening career development support systems.
- To provide foundational insights that support efforts to diversify professions and reduce structural barriers in career advancement.

References

Accounting. (2025, October 7). Accounting student pipeline issues: Findings from an online survey of high school and college students [Conference presentation]. American Accounting Association (AAA).

Dawkins, C., Kiefl, P., Lee, G., Madson, P., Mason, S., & Zimmerman, A. (2025). Theory and evidence on identities and career paths in professional services firms survey instrument [Unpublished survey]. Florida State University, The Ohio State University, Fordham University, University of Florida, & DePaul University.

Methods



- Independent: Academic background, class standing, professional experience
- Dependent: Career readiness, skill confidence, career clarity
- Controls: GPA range, field of study

- Social and cultural identity factors
- Academic major selection
- Career preparation experiences (e.g., internships, mentoring, networking)

- Survey distributed electronically
- Participation was voluntary and anonymous
- Data compiled and stored through Qualtrics

- Descriptive statistical analyses conducted to identify patterns in stated measures
- Exploratory analysis used to examine inequities across identity groups
- Identification of emerging trends

- Cross-sectional survey study
- Comparative research design
- Mixed-sample design including undergraduates and professionals

Responses (Demographics)



- Florida State University- 96 Responses
- Rutgers University- 32 Responses
- DePaul University- 57 Responses
- University of Florida- 1 Response
- University of Central Florida- 1 Response
- Ablene Christian University- 1 Response
- Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College- 1 Response

FIG. 1. Map of United States with location markers for each participating University.

How important are the following qualities in a job or career?

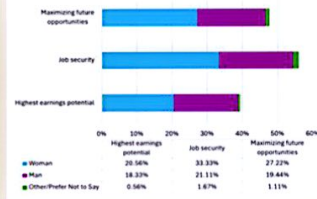


FIG. 2. Gender differences in the perceived importance of key career priorities. Across groups, job security received the highest ratings for "Extremely Important", with similar patterns observed for maximizing future opportunities and earnings potential.

Results & Conclusion

This study examined how social and cultural identity relate to undergraduate students' academic major selection, career preparation experiences, perceived institutional and social support, and post-graduate plans. The data succeeds in identifying related patterns across identity groups, as exemplified in Figure 1.

These takeaways are preliminary and are not a summation of the research as a whole:

- Research is ongoing to gather a broader range of responses from undergraduates across the US.
- There is sufficient data to find patterns in how identities impact career pathways.
- Preliminary findings indicate variation across identity categories in major selection priorities, access to internships and mentorship, perceived support systems, and post-graduate intentions.
- Additional analysis and expanded sampling will further clarify these observed patterns.
- Limits of our research involved the large amount of time and effort required to utilize the data.

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Sincerely yours,
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