Many students perceive their choice of major as leading toward a specific career path (but it doesn’t).

(Survey results complementing WE1S big-data research)

At the University of Miami, our surveys of undergraduates and non-undergraduates revealed that many students see their major as oriented to a specific career. As the graph shows, 62% of undergrads expect their major to lead to a profitable career, and 66% expect their major to lead to a specific career. Asking non-undergrads how they originally felt about their major yielded broadly similar results. When asked if their major had actually led to a “specific career,” however, only 48% of the latter group said yes; and only 36% said their chosen major had led to a profitable career.

Fields of study that do not have a clear vocational career path are thus seen as less valuable. In our follow-up focus group conversations, subjects associated liberal arts and humanities with “not a necessary career path” and “not a defined career path,” respectively. But as one grad student pointed out, this is not just a humanities issue. She described having to defend her science career to her father, because he "couldn't see the path.” And even when paths can be seen, they are restricted by precedent. One Black, female motion pictures major said she often gets asked, “Are you trying to be the next Shonda Rhimes, the next this or that?” For her, it seems that any deviation from such known career paths is perceived as failure.

However, in response to the survey question, What relationship does your major have to your current job?, 43% of non-undergrads (excluding current grad students) said that their jobs had either “no relation” or an “it depends” relation to their major. This is a substantial number of staff, faculty, and administrators in the university setting who view their major as having a “slight” to “no” relationship to their job.

In contrast to survey respondents, however, undergrads in our focus group were highly aware that their majors do not inevitably lead to a specific career. One commented, “Nobody cares at the end of the day what you major in.”

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1 Survey conducted Jan. to Feb. 2020 as part of WE1S’s human subjects research to complement big-data media research. There were 312 undergraduate respondents and 216 non-undergraduate respondents, including graduate students, faculty, staff, visiting scholars, and affiliates. (See our methods card M-6 on human subjects research.)

2 A few exceptions: only 45% of non-undergraduates said yes, and 18% said no, to the expectation that their major would lead to a profitable career. Additionally, 13% said no to expecting their major to lead to a specific career.

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Population Studied: C-HS-2, C-HS-4 (U. Miami undergrads & non-undergrads)


Related Cards: KF-4-9, KF-8-1

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