

What Influences AECL Students' Choice of Major? It's Not What You Think!

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Introduction/Need for Research

Recruitment in academia requires an understanding of student motivation and generational data can aid this process. Past research has focused on Millennials, but Generation Z (born 1995-2010) has grown up and is in today's college classroom (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). The majority of Generation Z was born after 9/11. Millennials are characterized by a lack of independence and a desire for approval from authority figures (Crumpacker & Crumpacker, 2007). However, motivational factors for Generation Z include advocating for their beliefs and witnessing the end product of their work (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). In order to prepare a proficient and skilled workforce (Stripling & Ricketts, 2016), the Agricultural Education, Communications, and Leadership (AECL) Department at Oklahoma State University must understand what influences undergraduate students' major choices. The purpose of this study was to explore the impact social pressure has on undergraduate students' choice of major in AECL at Oklahoma State University. The research question guiding this study was: Who and what influences undergraduate student's major choice in AECL at Oklahoma State University? We received approval from our institutional review board and conducted this study as a component of an undergraduate research course.

Conceptual Framework

Hodges and Karpova (2010) identified *interpersonal factors*, *personal characteristics*, and *environmental factors* influencing students' selection of college majors. *Interpersonal factors* consist of parents, friends, high school teachers, and college instructors (Hodge & Karpova, 2010). *Personal characteristics* are both objective and subjective: age, personality, aptitude, socioeconomic status (Hodge & Karpova, 2010). *Environmental factors* include employment, earning potential, and media (Hodge & Karpova, 2010). Research indicates college students have been influenced to select majors based on their parent's approval, potential financial earnings, occupational prestige, and social status related to the job (Stair, Blackburn, & Bunch, 2016; Scofield, 1994). Factors identified by Hodges and Karpova (2010) served as the conceptual framework for our study and guided the formation of survey questions related to influential components of major choice.

Methods

A 10-item questionnaire was developed to explore AECL students' perceptions of majors in the AECL department at Oklahoma State University, with nine additional questions gathering demographic data. The items analyzed for this study were related to the influence of social pressures (e.g., other people's opinions, family pressure, prestige, and other factors) to AECL students' choice of major. To establish reliability, the questionnaire was administered as a test-retest in a 15 person AECL graduate research methods course. The instrument demonstrated acceptable test-retest reliability with Phi correlation coefficients ranging between .51 and .90.

Minor edits were made to items with poor reliability and an advisory AECL faculty group confirmed face and content validity of the final questionnaire.

Our project team administered paper questionnaires to AECL undergraduate students during one week of the fall 2019 semester. More than 50% of undergraduate students in the department ($N = 208$; 53.4%) completed the questionnaire. One participant with an incomplete questionnaire was removed from the study, resulting in a final response rate of 207. Participants were 77.4% female ($n = 161$) and 22.1%, male ($n = 46$). Of this population, 54.3% were residents of Oklahoma and 45.7% were out-of-state students. Participant's ages ranged from 18-35 years ($M = 20$, $SD = 1.85$). Participants identified their major as agricultural education (AGED: 31.7%, $n = 66$), agricultural communications (AGCM: 47.1%, $n = 98$) and agricultural leadership (AGLE: 16.8%, $n = 35$). The distribution of participants across the majors in the AECL department was deemed to be representative of the overall population. Data were analyzed using SPSS© Version 23. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were calculated to answer our research questions.

Results/Findings

In assessing AECL student's major selection, the purpose of this study was to explore the impact social pressure has on undergraduate students' choice of major. Other people's opinions of their major did not matter for most (88.9 %, $n = 143$) of the AECL students. A small percentage of students (10.6 %, $n = 64$) did indicate people's opinions of their major mattered. Interest in the subject area was the most influential factor for major selection among 53.8 % ($n = 112$) of students. Only 3.8% ($n = 8$) of students indicated parental desires and family pressure influenced their choice of major. Students were least influenced by high paying job opportunities (0.5%, $n = 1$) in their field of study.

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

The results of this study conflict with findings from previous studies, AECL students are not sensitive to outside opinions about their major. Specifically, these findings contradict Scofield's (1994) findings that parents were an influential part of major choice. In our study, students relied on an interest in the subject area for major selection. This aligns with Hodge and Karpova's (2010) factor of *subjective personal characteristics*. Recruitment strategies for AECL students should emphasize personal interests and experiences. Moreover, AECL students are not selecting degree programs based on potential financial earnings. This finding is inconsistent with past research (Stair et al., 2016). As AECL students are not sensitive to other's views, we wonder if this could enhance a student's ability to advocate for the agricultural industry. More research focusing on undergraduate student motivation and major choices could help inform recruitment efforts. Future studies should explore differences between influential factors for male and female students.

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