



**Decisions and Regrets: Exploration of Factors Influencing Boston College Students' Choice  
of Major**

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### **Abstract**

This thesis aims to answer the question: How does a student decide on which major they declare? Can their major and the reasons for choosing it lead to feelings of regret? The survey and interviews use the reasons of passion, financial stability/job opportunity, parental influence, societal/friend influence, representation in the media, and pursuit of higher education to discover why students declare their major, and what majors lead to the highest regret rates.

This research is written from the perspective of Boston College seniors because they are on the precipice of graduation, about to start their first entry-level job or pursue higher education, and have fully completed their curriculum at BC. The research was conducted using a multitude of sociological theories including decision-making theory, career choice theory, gender socialization theory, and cultural capital theory.

**Keywords:** decision making; job opportunity; parental influence; major selection; career path; education; liberal arts

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**First Page:**

Nearly 2 in 5 American college students regret their major. This number changes within disciplines, with 50% of those majoring in the humanities, arts, and social sciences feeling regrets about their chosen area of study. This number decreases for those majoring in the STEM fields, with those in engineering and computer science having about a 25% chance of regretting their choice of major. The correlation between regret and the humanities has led to a growth in STEM majors and a decline in humanities majors beginning around 2008, at the start of the Great Recession; the shift toward STEM disciplines still continues today (Van Dam, 2022).

This shift is also generated by colleges and universities, with colleges jump-starting a decline in liberal arts by eliminating majors in the humanities discipline. Since 2008, the number of students majoring in the humanities has dropped by 15%, but the number of students obtaining bachelor's degrees has increased by 31%. The decline in liberal arts majors has forced universities to remove classes in the humanities entirely, causing students to not have the opportunity to major in those disciplines (PBS NewsHour, 2018). Universities and colleges like Lasell, West Virginia, Emporia State, and Hiram, have phased out a multitude of liberal arts classes and majors they had previously offered, leading to a surplus of layoffs within the selected departments. These disciplines are surviving through required general education courses, helping prevent some of the layoffs of these humanities-focused professors. This transition originated with the anthropology departments' elimination in many schools due to its overlap with other humanities courses, but this elimination continues to expand into English and History departments. (Huiskes, 2023) Due to the lack of disciplines and major options, students have been exploring and studying majors in STEM and business disciplines. Studies have also found

evidence that an undergraduate's desire for a high-paying career straight out of college has led to this drastic shift, although this conclusion might not be entirely accurate (Van Dam, 2022).

The findings and correlations between the Great Recession and the shift towards more STEM-oriented majors is a compelling discovery, but it is not due to higher income post-graduation; The underlying factor is debt. When students decide to pursue a college degree rather than join the workforce, it is anticipated that the diploma a student obtains brings them straight into a middle-class life. When that projection does not occur, students are dissatisfied due to the poor return on investment of easily accessible financial stability. Which major one pursues does not directly cause regret, but rather regret is caused by pursuing a degree that may not pay off in the long term. (Emba, 2022)

Society is money-conscious; humans feel they need financial stability for survival. Most pursue the majors they do in hopes of higher income and a livable wage post-graduation. The goal of this study is to find the social influences that cause students to pick the majors that they do. Statistically, there is more regret associated with the humanities, but students still pursue majors in that discipline. The study intends to discover if traits like class and gender influence what discipline a student chooses. The study also looks at societal influences, like parental persuasion, representation in the media, financial stability, and passion projects, to see if those influences shift what discipline a student pursues. Money is a huge factor, but societal influences and one's upbringing will have long-term impacts on the decisions one makes regarding their area of study.

**Theory:**Decision Making Theory

Decision theory is a consolidation of utility theory and probability theory. Utility theory is the process of evaluating potential outcomes and assigning numerical values to each outcome possible based on which is most desirable. Probability theory is encoding information based on which outcome is most likely to occur; probability theory is influenced by reflection and self-assessments. It declares which result has the most certainty of occurring guided by productive reasoning. As a result of both of these theories, decision theory developed, providing a rational framework for choosing between alternative courses of action with consideration of the consequences of each of the alternative courses; each decision and their anticipated outcomes are uncertain and made to achieve the best possible and most probable result (North, 1968).

D. W. North offers an example that effectively explains the principles of probability theory referred to as the anniversary decision problem; North assigns financial values to correlate with which outcome is the best outcome and which is the worst possible outcome. The scenario is that a man forgets his anniversary; his four options are domestic bliss at \$100, dog house at \$0, status quo at \$80, and suspicious wife at \$42. Domestic bliss is the best possible outcome; the man buys flowers with the uncertainty of whether or not it is his anniversary, and it ends up being his anniversary. Dog house is the worst possible outcome; it is the man's anniversary, and he did not buy his wife flowers. The status quo is the neutral good outcome. The man gambles and decides against purchasing flowers for his wife and it is not his anniversary. Suspicious wife is the most neutral outcome; the man purchases flowers but it is not his anniversary, so his wife is slightly suspicious. Assigning values to each possible outcome makes decision theory a little

more digestible, helps elaborate on the best and worst decisions, and demonstrates whether or not it is worth it to take the risk based on the resulting outcomes.

The riskiness of each of the decisions can be mitigated. Additionally, the man can ask his secretary if it is his anniversary. If the secretary says no, how likely is it that his secretary knows the date of his anniversary; if the secretary says yes, how likely is it that the secretary is lying to him? Doing this diminishes uncertainty associated with unknown factors of decision-making.

Decision theory is the formalization of common sense, forcing the decision maker to rely on their preferences and judgments. The decision maker analyzes possible alternatives in their decision-making process and mitigates risk to the best of their ability in hopes of achieving the best possible outcome (North, 1968).

### Social Learning Theory and Career Decision Making

Social Learning Theory, created by psychologist Albert Bandura, proposed that “learning occurs through observation, imitation, and modeling and is influenced by factors such as attention, motivation, attitudes, and emotions” (Cherry, 2022). Social learning theory states that people learn through the consequences of other people’s behaviors. Witnessing the social interactions of others induces people to learn new information and behaviors. The three core concepts of social learning theory are people learning through observation, internal mental states, and recognizing that experiencing something will not result in a change of behavior (Cherry, 2022). What cultivates successful social learning are attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation. One must pay attention in order to learn, store the information, reproduce the obtained information and behaviors, and be motivated to imitate the viewed behavior.

Social learning theory can have positive and negative impacts. It is used to help researchers comprehend how violence present in the media can influence children to act out aggressively. Teachers use it by acting in a manner knowing their students will replicate it and acquire knowledge from their educators. Being aware of social learning theory helps humans understand how their actions can influence others due to learning through observation (Cherry, 2022).

Social learning theory has a subcategory surrounding careers called Career Decision Making. There are three competing theories of career decision-making: (1) matching persons to placement, (2) identifying traits of personality, skill, and interest necessary to complete the job, and (3) seeing if those who are searching for jobs have the capability to fulfill these three desired qualifications. It is a process where one needs to match themselves to an appropriate career path where they will thrive and succeed, taking their strengths and weaknesses into consideration. This process is not easy, hence why children's dream aspirations shift as they grow, experience life, explore new interests, and discover where they excel. This theory emphasizes that the decision is fundamentally individual, contains rationality, and that the prime factors determining choice remain within the influence of the individuals. How the individuals are influenced could make a decision not so individual; Social and cultural factors blend with personal choices causing a merge in preferences that incorporate into one's career choice. One needs to be aware that what they observe can cause biases they are unaware of and will cause them to follow a path they may not be passionate about (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997).

### Gender Socialization

Gender socialization is the "process by which individuals develop, refine, and learn to 'do' gender through internalizing gender norms and roles as they interact with key agents of

socialization, such as their family, social networks, and other institutions". Gender socialization stems from the gender inequities, discriminations, and stereotypes that exist in society today (Hoominfar, 2021). This process affects people at an early age, with children becoming aware of their gender and who they are by around three years old. The social construct of gender influences individuals, placing them into certain boxes and forcing them to adhere to stereotypes associated with their gender; it promotes children feeling as if they have been assigned roles and responsibilities that only someone in their socially constructed gender can accomplish. This socialization cultivates in relationships with parents, peers, teachers, and media. They can all influence children to act according to their socially constructed expectations of gender. Gender socialization impacts impressionable young adults, consequently shaping their lives (Guy-Evans, 2023). This socialization can impact one's career path and profession, making it a substantial consideration in society today. Work, and what type of work one pursues, is very segregated and gendered. Specific industries can be dominated by one gender originating from gendered socialization. Nursing and education are predominantly women. Jobs in technology and engineering are male-dominated. There are strong correlations between gender and employment.

#### Rational Choice Theory and Judgement and Decision Making Theory

Rational choice theory became popularized in the 1980s and 1990s responding to the growing gap between social theory and quantitative research. Rational choice theory, best known as RTC, provides a theoretical framework of actions by showing meaningful descriptions of individual behavior. RTC demonstrates that decisions are shaped by the social environment and are not just based on a person's underlying decision process. RTC overlaps a lot with Judgement and Decision Making Theory, or JDM. JDM contrasts how fully informed individuals behave compared to how people behave in actuality; the deviation of human's actual decisions versus

the normative model decisions display how societal factors influence a person's thought process and choices.

Many factors shape decision-making processes. Cognitive, emotional, and contextual factors all greatly influence what decision one will make. Cognitive factors exhibit how choices are characterized by multiple attributes, with no choice being the most optimal; as a person comes to a decision, they go through a process, eliminating options and declaring one decision over another. The emotional factors are less methodical; they consider which decision has more or less emotional trade-offs, and select the most attractive choice or the least difficult. Contextual factors are associated with social environments like a person's school, neighborhood, and financial situation. Social environments greatly influence the decisions that a person makes.

The social context aspects that influence the decision-making process are (1) available opportunity, (2) the importance of default options, (3) time pressure and constrained resources, (4) and the choices of others. The choices one makes consider these aspects, with people assigning different weights to the attributes of each choice. Awareness of what one person weighs more when making decisions allows for insights into the correlation between decision processes and their implications. (Bruch, 2017)

### Cultural Capital Theory in Modern Times

Education is the dominant pathway to success. Evident in current society, those who are socially privileged thrive and flourish in an educational setting; there is a strong correlation between social privilege and academic success. This correlation is the theory of cultural capital. Constructed by Bourdieu, this theory is defined as "institutionalized, i.e., widely shared, high-status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goals, and

credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion" (Kingston, 2001, p. 89). He describes capital as a resource with market value, and that cultural capital helps discipline students in higher classes, fitting them into the educational system more effectively. The formation of this cultural capital is exclusionary because it advances the careers of those who fall in "socially dominant" classes and sets those with less social capital up for failure causing them to experience obstacles those with cultural and social capital do not have.

The two questions that arise when discussing the social capital theory are if there is a cultural capital related to the achievement net of other determinants, and to what extent do these advantages of cultural capital directly impact the relationship between social privilege and academic success? Bourdieu's theory derives from a European perspective stating that those who have the social capital can attend museums and experience education in that manner will place students above others, but how accurate can that be? (Kingston, 2001). Our society has developed, and prioritizes different forms of education.

In our current society, what places students above others in regard to social capital and education are test scores, both SAT and ACT, what type of high school one attends, whether it be public or private, their prior grades at their school, and the number of AP classes on one's transcript. Many colleges and universities in the U.S. have become test-optional, with the opportunity to provide scores if students deem them relevant, but they are not obligated to do so. A study done by the *Washington Post* discusses how standardized test scores favor those in affluent families. SAT scores are highly correlated with income, with families who have a household income of \$200,000 or higher scoring almost 400 points higher (1714) than those who are from families with an income of under \$20,000 (1326); these statistics on standardized test scores were taken before the SAT changed their grade scale from 2400 to a 1600-point scale.

Test scores are also disproportionately impacted if a student has a parent with a graduate degree, compared to a student whose parents have not yet obtained their high school diploma; the discrepancy is almost a 300-point separation, with those born to parents with graduate degrees scoring 1689 on average, compared to those born to parents without a high school diploma scoring 1294 on average. Another inequity influenced by social and cultural capital theory is PSAT training and participation. The PSAT is offered at most private schools every year beginning during freshman year. The PSAT is a practice SAT, meant to show students what sections they thrive in, and in what sections of the standardized test they need to develop their skills. Schools in wealthier communities are more likely to do a better job of preparing students for this standardized testing, and this is evident through the inequities in test scores. Those who had access to the PSAT before their junior year do exceptionally better than those who did not have access to a practice SAT during their school time, with a 200-point difference between the two types of students. This discrepancy in social and cultural capital can unfavorably affect students who do not have access to these resources, due to their financial status (Goldfarb, 2014).

Financial status isn't just a high predictor of standardized test scores but of Advanced Placement test scores as well. Advanced Placement, or AP courses, are classes offered at public and private high schools; they are organized by the College Board. These courses are more rigorous than normal honors-level courses offered by high schools, and can allow students to test out of their college courses; this is done through high scores on the AP exam, usually a three or above, and the exams are offered at the end of every school year. AP courses are beneficial, helping students stand out on their high school transcripts. Colleges take one's course load, not just their GPA, into consideration when viewing college applications and allowing students acceptance into their university. Having more AP classes, and corresponding AP exam scores,

demonstrate a readiness for college some high school students do not have. Although both private and high schools offer AP electives, there is a correlation between private high schools and higher AP scores. Public schools distribute more AP exams than private ones which could be a contributing factor, but studies show that students who attend private high schools score on average .3 points higher than students who attend a public high school. This number may seem minuscule, but the exam is scored on a 1-5 scale, and the gap between private and public school AP scores grows exponentially larger depending on race and ethnicity. Asian students in both public and private schools score the highest, and have the smallest differentiation, with a gap of approximately .2 separating the test scores. The largest gap is between American Indian and Pacific Islander students at both public and private high schools, with the scores on average being .6 points higher if attending a private high school. Both Black students and Hispanic or Latino students have a score gap of about .5, and White students have an AP score gap between private and public high schools of approximately .3 (Higher Education Data Stories, 2021).

Paying for private high school as opposed to attending public, although a very large financial burden, can drastically shift how one scores on both SAT and Advanced Placement exams. These results can influence where one attends college, how one excels in the college setting, and where one ends up post-graduation. Cultural social capital doesn't seem very drastic, with certain opportunities not having strong influences on students, but it can shift how one excels academically, which strengthens their transcript and can lead one to a highly reputable university or college. The discrepancy between socioeconomic status and academic achievement is unfair and needs to be addressed by the College Board, school systems, and administration.

## Literature Review – Peer/Parental Influence

### Parental Influence on Children's Career Path

Parents can be the most influential person in their child's life; their choices can significantly affect their child's development. Parents raise their children and teach them how to survive. As they grow up, children strive to emulate their parents; they witness their parents' actions, and attempt to copy those behaviors. Children during their developmental years are heavily impacted by those they are surrounded by, and the parenting style one grows up with can have long-term effects. Parenting style is "the attitudes and practices that parents adopt, which can impact their children's development" (Mincu, 2023). The four parenting style categories are permissive, authoritative, authoritarian, and neglectful. Permissive parents give their children positive experiences with limited structure. Authoritative parenting uses warmth and understanding to discipline children while setting clear boundaries. Authoritarian parents impose strict rules, limiting a child's self-expression. The neglectful parenting style is parents failing to provide their child with basic care. If children do not have the appropriate parenting style or lack proper structure, there can be long-term repercussions like low self-esteem, poor academic performance, feelings of inadequacy, and developmental delays (Mincu, 2023).

How a child is raised can influence their personality and can also affect what a child decides to pursue as a career. Family values and work ethic are traits children observe from their parents and will shape a child's desired career path. If prevalent in the familial dynamic, gender stereotyping can also shape a child's dream job (Jungen, 2008). A study done by the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill found that approximately half of freshman parents felt they were neutral, and had no influence on their child's declared major, however, additional research

demonstrated that parents could influence what major, and even what career a child decides to pursue (Kniveton, 2004). This can be dangerous, as children will have aspirations that align with their parents' norms, values, expectations, and opinions, rather than following their passions and developing their own identity. Children become aware of these norms at a young age through the activities, sports, and extracurriculars their parents register them for (Jungen, 2008).

Parental relationships with their child can also sway a child in a certain direction. Children often look toward their mothers for guidance and their fathers regarding careers. A child's gender identity also shapes their decision on which parent to follow; boys are more likely to obey paternal expectations, and girls are more likely to observe maternal expectations. This can lead to gender normativity if their parents adhere closely to gender stereotypes, and can cause children to fall into gendered categories and gendered careers. For example, a daughter raised by a stay-at-home mom is likely to want to be a stay-at-home mother when they get older. Similarly, a son who has a stay-at-home mom is likely to anticipate their wife to be a stay-at-home mom in the future. Parent-child interaction and the layout of one's home dynamic can greatly influence a child's future (Jungen, 2008).

### Peer Influence on Career Path

Career planning is not prevalent until late adolescence or early adulthood. That is usually right at the start of college, where young adults meet a new demographic of people, and separate from their parents and hometown influences. During this period, students become acquainted with new courses, new potential interests, and new career possibilities. Career decision-making is a "dynamic and ongoing process where knowledge of self, values, interests, temperament, financial needs, physical work brings changes in one's life situation and environment" (Kaur, 2020). Career planning combines personal interest, personality, parental expectations, and many

other external factors. Peer pressure is one of the external factors. Peer pressure is a "strong feeling that one must do the same things as other people their age if they want to be liked" (Kaur, 2020).

Peer pressure establishes itself during students' college careers. Undecided freshmen students will often take classes that their friends are in, form study groups, and cultivate relationships in courses within particular areas of study. Peer influence fluctuates by gender, with women being more likely to be affected by their peers than men (Kazi 2017). Friends and peer groups are important for socialization, and a large aspect of the college experience is when students decide their careers. Studies show that the pressure put on students by their peers to pursue a different career is often positive. The youth are an impressionable demographic, and college is an important time frame for students to explore new interests and create new friendships. Peer pressure by peers is often in response to students pursuing careers that are not making them happy, usually as a result of parental pressure. The peer pressure from friends revolving around careers is beneficial to students, guiding them towards pursuing a major they are genuinely passionate about rather than what their parents want them to pursue. Peer pressure is prevalent in this environment, and it sways career paths, but in a truly advantageous way (Naz, 2014).

#### Parental Influence on Child's Success

Most children's success develops due to support from their parents in both an emotional and financial context. Some children win the "birth lottery". This term is about those born into families with higher levels of education, generating economic growth, and giving the child a natural advantage. Studies show that parental income, marital status, and region greatly influence children and their future potential.

Income is the most dominant factor, with parental income being a strong predictor of what their children will make. Familial income positively correlates with one's likelihood to attend college; as parental income increases, college attendance rates increase.

Marriage is another influence that can impact children. According to the study, one who grows up in a single-parent household, as opposed to a two-parent household, is less likely to have a chance of economic income mobility; there is a negative correlation between upward mobility and single-family households. According to the research, this is the strongest correlation present in the study.

Where a child grows up can also affect how they will financially flourish. According to a regional map of the United States created from the study results, upward mobility is least likely for those living in the Southeast; states like Louisiana, Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Mississippi fall within this region. The most opportunity for upward mobility is most promising in states located on the West Coast, and in the Midwest, with mixed results in the Northeast. States in the West like California, Hawaii, Washington, Oregon, Nevada, and Arizona, and the Midwest states of Nebraska, Arkansas, and Minnesota are those that will set up children to thrive. New England and the Northeast have mixed results; some areas of Massachusetts and New York state are great locations demonstrating potential for upward mobility. Other states in the Northeast display less of a likelihood for upward mobility including Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont. These states fall in the middle range of potential upward mobility.

Where and to whom one is born influences how upwardly mobile one will be. This is pertinent to the study because class in the research is defined by parental income. Parental

income, marital status, and hometown are external influences that impact what a student will make in the future (Griswold, 2013).

### Parental Education Level & Its Influence on their Children

Parents who attended college or university place a higher value on educational attainment. Parents and their education level greatly influence their children's decisions regarding their education. Of all students who are enrolled in four-year universities, almost half have parents with college degrees; 26% of students who attended four-year universities are first-generation. Parental influence on education is more significant than one would anticipate. People whose parents do not hold any degree or who entered the workforce straight out of high school are more likely to feel that college is not worth the cost or that they do not need a college degree to pursue a career. This same dynamic is evident in parents who pursued higher education as well; if a child sees their parents obtaining degrees and encouraging a strong work ethic, their child may prioritize education and value it. (Lamar University, 2021)

### Milestones and Mental Health

Studies show that meaningful life events greatly influence people's general emotional states, life satisfaction, and the decisions they make during their lives. When people achieve certain milestones like turning a certain age, graduating, and marriage, they begin to think more deeply about the choices they have made and where they should be at that stage in their lives. It is the "mental map of the life cycle" where people have set conceptions of life stages and transitions. (Miron-Shatz, Talya, et al., 2016) Traditionally, having a career map was praised but the job market is drastically different from what it was in the past. The market is fluid with opportunities to work from any location as well as being able to work in fields where one doesn't have that academic background. Today, it is better to embrace this fluidity because having a

career map can lead to unnecessary stress and cause one to miss out on new opportunities. Additionally, career maps are solo, but careers are usually collaborative. Employees grow with their company and coworkers. Studies show that when the employee's goals align with their organization rather than their desires, performance significantly improves. Overplanning and having a set five-, ten-, or fifteen-year plan can be detrimental. Mindfulness and setting realistic career goals are important (Travers, 2023).

### **Literature Review – Post-College Job Opportunity Influences**

#### Gen Z and Education Rates – College/University Standpoint

A college degree is a strong advantage in the U.S. Labor Market. Having a college degree can lead to a higher income compared to those who have not yet attended college. Current statistics demonstrate that approximately 40% of Americans ages 25 or older have a bachelor's degree, and this demographic is steadily increasing. 14.3% of those over 25 in the U.S. have a degree higher than their bachelor's. There has also been a recent transition of gender demographics at the university level, with women now more likely to graduate from college. Ethnic and racial background also greatly influence whether or not a person will choose to pursue a college diploma. 61% of Asian Americans 25 years or older have a bachelor's degree. This number decreases for other demographics, with 42% of White adults, 28% of Black adults, and 21% of Hispanic adults having their bachelor's degree. These percentages are increasing.

There are a multitude of reasons why a large percentage of people do not obtain their bachelor's. In reference to gender, 34% of men who responded to the study stated they didn't acquire a bachelor's degree because they didn't want to; the other factor driving men toward not pursuing higher education was that their goal profession did not necessitate higher education (20%). 25% of women felt similarly to the men; the dominant factor pushing women to not

pursue higher education is financial issues. Women are more likely unable to afford higher education compared to men, creating a drop in those pursuing college. Additionally, financial issues disproportionately impact certain racial and ethnic demographics. Hispanic adults (52%) are more likely than their White (39%) and Black (41%) counterparts to have issues paying for their bachelor's.

Completing a degree program will differentiate depending on the caliber of the university or college one attends. The study shares that only 62% of students who start a degree finish their program within six years. Those who attended four-year, private schools complete their bachelor's 78.3% of the time in six years, and those who attended two-year public universities are 42.2% likely to complete their certificate or degree program in six years (Schaeffer, 2022).

#### Unemployment Post Graduation Per Major

The U.S. economy recently released figures that U.S. businesses had added 199,000 new jobs during November. Due to this change, the U.S. unemployment rate fell from 3.9% to 3.7%; the unemployment rate hasn't been this low since before the pandemic. During the height of the pandemic, unemployment in the United States had hit double digits, peaking in April of 2020 at 14.7% of U.S. citizens being unemployed. This low jobless rate has stayed below 4% for almost two years, making it the longest streak since the late 1960's. The healthcare industry added new jobs in November, creating 93,000 new positions. Hotels and restaurants saw an increase of 40,000 jobs, and 49,000 jobs made available were in the government sector (MSN, 2023).

Unemployment is currently low due to an influx of new jobs created by businesses. Considering the types of jobs are that being created, which majors are the most employable in our current job market? The major with the lowest unemployment rates is currently any major in Education. Miscellaneous Education has an unemployment rate of 0.6%, General Education is at

1.8% unemployment, Secondary Education is at 2.6%, Special Education is at 2.7%, and Early Childhood Education is at 3.1% unemployment. All of the unemployment rates are well below the average. Other majors with low unemployment are Nursing at 1.3%, Miscellaneous Engineering at 3.4%, and Business Analytics at 2.2%. There is a correlation between low unemployment rates and shortages within those careers. In our current economy, there is currently a nurse and teacher shortage, so the low unemployment rate is not surprising.

Some majors and disciplines are associated with extraordinarily high unemployment rates, some almost quadrupling the current average unemployment rate. The Fine Arts has an unemployment rate of 12.1%, Philosophy has a 9.1% unemployment rate, Sociology at 9%, and Family and Consumer Sciences at 8.9%. General business falls at around the 5.3% unemployment rate, and majors in the natural sciences, like Biology, Psychology, and Biochemistry, all have an unemployment rate of 4.7%. There is a discrepancy between majors in the humanities and high unemployment rates, and majors in education and low unemployment rates (Statista, 2023).

#### Does Major Impact One's Future Career Opportunity

What major one pursues does not put them in a box for career options. Having a degree transcends, and it is not necessary to stick to jobs "best suited" for a certain major. According to a study by the U.S. Bureau of Census, only 62.1% of college graduates have jobs that require a degree. The same study stated that only 27% of those with a college degree are in a profession that is related or closely related to their major. This factor changes depending on where you live, with those living in large cities being more likely to find a profession within their degree or major. (Plumer, 2013)

The likeliness of pursuing a career in one's major differentiates depending on the area of study. Those who pursue science and engineering-related majors are 45% likely to pursue a career in that discipline. Those who pursue education are 40% likely to pursue a career in their major. The numbers then drastically drop, with all other disciplines falling below the 27% threshold. The majors least likely to pursue careers within their discipline of study are Communications at 6%, Psychology at 8%, and Languages and Literature at 9%. The statistics are demonstrative that college graduates with the same major will enter a diverse field of occupations; what one majors in does not limit their career options. Job opportunities are not structured around major, but the skills one has as a worker (Whitmore Schanzenbach, 2017).

### **Literature Review – Job Opportunity Post-High School**

#### Gen Z and Education Rates – High School Standpoint

For the first time, the percentage of the American population aged 25 or older having at least a high school diploma is above 90%; this is a dramatic transition with that percentage being around 24% less than eighty years ago. This percentage decreases depending on demographics, but all racial and financial demographics are experiencing an increase in high school completion. Non-Hispanic whites who have a high school degree increased from 86% to 94% since 1997. The percentage of African-Americans with a high school diploma has increased from 75% to 87%. Hispanic high school completion over the past twenty years has gone from 55% to 71%. Education has become a stepping stone in our current society; a high school diploma or completion of the GED is becoming a prerequisite for many jobs. The question is, who does not fall into this 90% demographic, who is the 10% without a high school diploma?

Those born in the United States compared to those who move to the United States at a young age have different rates of graduating high school. Of the 10% who have not graduated from high school, foreign-born individuals account for 54% of that demographic. This number spreads across all races and ethnicities (Schmidt, 2018).

**Methods:**

The research study intends to answer the question: What influences senior undergraduate students to pursue their chosen major? Have their opinions on their discipline of choice shifted in retrospect since deciding their major early in their college career? The research will look for correlations between major and social influences like gender and class, defined by parental income. It will discuss the decision processes behind one's choice of major, and the reasons behind it, like job opportunities post-graduation, parental/societal pressure, passion projects, representation in the media, and pursuit of higher education. The hypothesis states that those of lower or middle-class socioeconomic status will more often than not pursue a major that offers financial stability and good future job prospects post-graduation. Another anticipated hypothesis is that women will be more likely to choose majors for passion-based reasons, whereas men will pursue their majors for financial gain. This is anticipated due to stereotypes ingrained into society that men need to be the breadwinners of the household and need to carry the brunt of the income.

The research design is qualitatively based on using a Qualtrics survey and an optional interview for those who opt into partaking to obtain data. The rationale behind this design is to obtain qualitative information about Boston College students' areas of study and the reasonings behind their choices, but in a large enough quantity, around 100 Boston College seniors, to identify potential trends. The interviews then will go into detail about selected students, around 5-10 individuals, to acquire more personal reflections about their specific motivations behind choosing their chosen discipline.

The participants in the research sample are current seniors at Boston College who are graduating in May of 2024. These participants will be recruited through the Class of 2024

*GroupMe*, and by Boston College email; It will be a form of convenience sampling. The exclusionary issue with the sample will be that the only responses obtained will be those who choose to partake in the survey rather than getting a more diverse background of students. Similarly, the only interviews will be the students who opted to participate; this could limit the sample.

The data collected will be qualitative results with both multiple-choice and open-response questions. The responses will then be coded, being organized by choice of discipline, as well as by class, and gender, which will be self-reported by survey participants. The survey questions will also delve into at what age the students picked their major, as well as why. This could be for financial reasons, intent to pursue higher education, passion-based reasons, and other potential choice options. The questions then get a little more personal, with the students discussing regrets about their discipline, and if they could go back and change, would they? At the end of the survey, the students can opt to partake in an interview if they choose. The interviews will then occur with survey participants who decide to opt into an interview. The interviews will be about half an hour, just discussing their survey results in more detail and noting why the interviewees chose the major they did to see if there are potential correlations and trends between students at Boston College. There is a strong likelihood that what discipline one chooses to study will have been influenced by class and gender.

There are limitations to the research study; the seniors participating in the survey and interviews are students at Boston College. Boston College is a liberal arts Jesuit university in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts. It has approximately 9,500 undergraduates currently enrolled, making it a mid-sized college. It is a predominantly white institution, with 34.7% of students identifying as African, Hispanic, Asian, or Native American, better known as AHANA, and 4%

of students being International Students. Boston College also has a relatively affluent student body, with approximately 39% of students on need-based financial aid (*Facts and Figures - about BC - Boston College*, n.d.). Boston College also has slightly more women, with 53% of the undergraduate population identifying as female. In regard to discipline, out of the 9,484 undergraduates, the most populous areas of study are Finance (1,360), Economics (1,186), Biology (883), and Political Science (743). The most common minors at Boston College are Finance (566), Marketing (258), Management and Leadership (257), Management for Social Impact (170), and Computer Science (148). For those seeking higher education, there are 1,766 undergraduates registered under the pre-medical track, and 679 students registered under the pre-law track; These statistics are from the 2022-23 Fact Book produced by Boston College every year (*Fact Book - Institutional Research & Planning - Boston College*, n.d.). Considering the limited demographics at Boston College, the results can be impacted by those who decide to partake in the survey. Had this survey been taken at an institution with a larger or smaller population, more or less diversity in race and class, more or less variety in major and minor options, and many other potential factors, the results could have shifted dramatically. This study was limited to one university, making the research more concise, but leading to a potential skew, or lack of diversity in the results.

**Data Analysis:**

To reiterate, the two questions this study intends to answer are: (1) What influences senior undergraduate students to pursue their chosen major? (2) Have their opinions on their discipline of choice shifted in retrospect since deciding their major early on in their college career? The data obtained from the survey is going to be majority multiple choice questions about gender identity, social class, majors and minors, when students picked their major, whether they knew their career path when they decided their area of study, why they picked their major, why some students have decided to pursue higher education, if students regret their major of choice, and if so, there is an open response question allowing students to explain why they feel regrets towards their major. Using the data from the multiple choice and the open-response questions on the survey determines who will be interviewed. The first research question will be answered by the multiple choice responses. The second research question will be answered by the open-ended responses and the interviews. Examining the descriptive results of the survey will make obtaining the necessary data for interviews easy because the survey is brief but straightforward and detailed.

The results will be organized into multiple categories: what discipline students are studying, if they feel regrets toward their major, why they chose their major initially, and what year they chose their major. The major categories are going to be broken up based on the most popular majors in the survey results and also other general discipline categories: Finance, Economics, Political Science, Carroll School of Management (CSOM) majors outside of Finance, STEM, Lynch School of Education and Human Development majors (LSOEHD), Connell School of Nursing (CSON), and Morrissey College of Arts and Sciences majors (MCAS) not including MCAS majors in the STEM categories. This is the best demographic

breakdown of the majors without being too honed in. The reason majors like Finance, Economics, and Political Science are in categories separate from their schools is because these are the most populous majors at Boston College and make up a large portion of the respondents in the survey. Keeping these categories separate will help guide the research and not keep the results too broad.

Being aware of when students declared their major and whether they are feeling regrets may work together cohesively in the research. If students applied to their major before stepping foot on BC's campus or decided on their major early on in their college experience, like freshman year they may be feeling differently about their major four years later. Noticing the relationship between regrets and the timeframe in which students choose their major may have a strong correlation. Also, awareness of why students choose their major may correlate with regrets. Acknowledging these potential relationships will be beneficial regarding the results section.

**Results of Survey:**

The survey was taken by 124 Boston College students in the Class of 2024, making the pool a relatively small portion of the total population of the senior class. The demographics within the survey regarding gender were 75 respondents identifying as female (60.5%), 45 respondents identifying as male (36.3%), 3 respondents identifying as non-binary (2.4%), and 1 respondent preferring not to disclose their gender identity (>1%).

**Female Respondents Reason for Their Major:**

Of the 75 female respondents, the breakdown of disciplines was 45 of the women studying within the Morrissey Arts and Sciences (60%), with 8 of those women (17.8%) majoring in Economics, 4 of those women (8.9%) majoring in Political Science, and 21 of those women (46.7%) having an additional minor in Boston College's Carroll School of Management. 12 of the women in the survey (26.7%) studied a discipline within the Carroll School of Management, with 7 of those women's (58.3%) chosen concentrations being Finance. The survey also had 8 women (17.7%) in STEM majors, 7 women (15.6%) majoring in disciplines within the Lynch School of Education and Human Development (LSOEHD), and 4 women (8.9%) in The Connell School of Nursing (CSON).

When asking the women why they chose their major, the results were quite diverse. 65 of the women (86.7%) selected their major for passion or pleasure-related reasons. Over half of the women in the survey (53.3%) picked their major for Financial Reasons/Potential Job Opportunity reasons. Only 14.7% of the women were influenced by their parents to pursue their chosen discipline, with an even smaller percentage deciding their major due to friends or societal expectations (8%). The smallest impact on why women chose their major was representation in

the media, with only 5.3% of women at Boston College considering this a factor when deciding upon their major.

Of the small percentage who chose their major for reasons outside of passion or pleasure, 42.9% were studying majors in the Arts and Sciences, with 33.3% of those students studying Economics. The rest of the women (57.1%) were in the Carroll School of Management, with 75% of them having a concentration in Finance. Of those who selected their major for reasons outside of financial and job opportunity, 23 women (65.7%) majored in the Morrissey College of Arts and Sciences, with 13% of those being Political Science Majors. 6 of the women (17.1%) studied within the Lynch School of Education and Human Development. 3 of the women (8.6%) were in STEM-related disciplines. 1 woman (2.9%) studied within the Carroll School of Management but with a concentration outside of Finance.

The pursuit of higher education can affect what major one declares. If one is considering higher education, their undergraduate major may be less significant, so they have more freedom regarding their major of choice. Additionally, one's reason for pursuing higher education may be different from why they declared their undergraduate major. Of the 75 women in the sample, 84% are considering pursuing higher education. Of those considering pursuing higher education, 38.1% are on the fence and are potentially pursuing higher education, and 61.9% are pursuing higher education. Of those who may pursue higher education, 66.7% are considering higher education due to financial or better job opportunity reasons. 33.3% are considering the pursuit of higher education for passion or pleasure-related interest, and a small percentage (8.3%), are considering higher education because of parental, friend, or societal pressure. Of those who are pursuing higher education, 89.7% are pursuing higher education for financial reasons. 71.8% are pursuing it for passion reasons. 15.4% chose to pursue higher education due to parental

persuasion, and 7.7% chose to pursue higher education due to friend persuasion. 7.7% are pursuing higher education due to representation in the media, and 12.8% are pursuing higher education for reasons outside the options listed.

#### Male Respondents Reason for Their Major:

The men's areas of study differed from the women's drastically. Of the 45 male respondents, just over half (51.3%), are in the Arts and Sciences at Boston College. Of those men, 65.2% are majoring in Economics, and 26% majoring in Political Science. 4 men of the 23 in the Arts and Sciences (17.3%) are double majoring in Economics and Political Science. A little under half (42.2%), are studying a discipline within the Carroll School of Management, with 89.5% of this group studying to obtain a concentration in Finance. The rest of the sample (13.3%) are STEM majors. None of the male students in the sample are studying within the Lynch School of Education and Human Development (LSOEHD), or the Connell School of Nursing (CSON).

When asking these men their reasoning for their major, their answers again disagreed with the women's. Whereas women were more driven by their passions when determining their selected discipline, men were more likely to choose their major for financial reasons. Of the 45 men in the survey, 39 (86.7%) picked their major for financial stability and potential job opportunity reasons. Only 60% of the men picked their major for a passion or pleasure-related reason. Men, according to the results, are more likely than women to have parental, friend, or societal pressure influencing their decision behind their major; 17.7% of the men in the survey had parental influence dictating their selected discipline, and 15.5% were influenced either by friends, or societal expectations. The smallest influence on major choice was representation in the media, with only 6.7% having this as a deciding factor.

Regarding higher education, fewer men are considering pursuing higher education. Additionally, their reasons for pursuing higher education overlap with women's but vary slightly. Of the 45 men in the sample, 35 (77.8%) are considering pursuing higher education. Their reasons behind pursuing higher education are predominantly financial and passion-driven, with 60% of the survey respondents pursuing higher education for financial reasons. 51.4% are pursuing higher education for passion or pleasure reasons; this is a stark difference compared to the 33.3% of women pursuing higher education for passion, and the 66.7% of women pursuing higher education for financial reasons. 14.3% are pursuing or are considering pursuing higher education due to parental influence, and 8.6% are pursuing or considering pursuing higher education due to friend or societal pressure. 8.6% are considering pursuing or pursuing higher education due to representation in the media. 14.3% are considering pursuing or pursuing higher education due to another outside reason not explicitly stated in the survey.

#### Regret Rates and Reasoning:

Only a portion of the sample regretted their major (22.8%). Of those who did, it was almost evenly split by gender, with 50% of those feeling regrets being female, 42.9% being male, and 7.1% of the sample identifying as non-binary. The disciplines most regretted were those in the Arts and Sciences (71%), with Carroll School of Management falling second most regretted (21.9%) and STEM being the third most regretted (8.7%). No one in the survey whose disciplines are in the Lynch School of Education and Human Development (LSOEHD), or the Connell School of Nursing (CSON) felt regrets or qualms regarding their major. The most regretted majors in the survey were Finance, Political Science, and Economics. All three majors made up 21.4% of those who regret their major. It is important to note that those three majors are some of the most common majors at Boston College and in the survey, so the prevalence of those

feeling regret could be due to the availability of more data. The other frequently regretted majors in the survey were Sociology (14.3%), Psychology (10.7%), and Philosophy (7.1%).

For those who felt regrets about their Finance degrees, the regret predominantly stemmed from the desire to pursue another branch of business in the Carroll School of Management (CSOM), rather than changing disciplines entirely, and how the desire for a job prompted them to pursue a concentration in Finance. Of the students who regretted their finance major, the large majority (83.3%) had chosen their major for financial stability reasons. One male student with a double major in both Finance and Economics shared this desire to change disciplines, and his concerns regarding the job market when he shared:

“Finance and Economics is a very tough industry to get into right now with a bad job market. Accounting seems much more stable and recession-proof in terms of the job market, wish I did that.”

Job stability guides students when choosing what degree to pursue. A female student with a Finance concentration in CSOM also felt similar when she shared:

“I find more joy in coding, so I wish I would have majored in Business Analytics or Computer Science. I am more passionate about that than Finance. I regret just going with the norm of what makes the most money despite that I do have a job secured unlike most people.”

Many students also felt that the Finance major they had selected wasn't what they expected and wished they had pursued something else within CSOM. Many students grapple with this, especially when they declare their major early in their college career.

For those who felt regrets about their Political Science degree, there were a multitude of reasons as to why. Many students pursued Political Science anticipating they would attend law

school post-graduation. They discovered that law school is not their calling and feel their major is not applicable because they didn't pursue higher education. One male student shared this concern when he stated:

“I feel that my Political Science major is directed only toward law school and does not provide me with any real world skills that I can utilize when applying for jobs and other positions”

A female student shared similar concerns when she stated:

“Somewhat regret pursuing Political Science specifically for a career pipeline I am no longer pursuing”

Other reasons behind students regretting their Political Science degree stem from choosing their major for passion-related reasons, and at the end of their college career, it wasn't what they expected. Every student in the sample who majored in Political Science and felt regrets pursued their major for passion reasons. One male student describes this struggle when he states:

“The major wasn't as interesting as I had hoped. I don't regret it completely, but I think I would have picked something more enjoyable or useful like Finance or International Studies”

This quotation mentions the desire for a major deemed "more useful". Useful in this context probably means a major creating job opportunities and wealth post-graduation. The survey results indicate Political Science students' concerns regarding the job market and work post-graduation. One student expresses these worries about job offers when she shares:

“It is hard to see people in CSOM getting return offers and having set plans following graduation. I chose Political Science and no longer want to go into politics, so that is an issue for the job search. Maybe I would pursue International Studies”

The main issue students grapple with regarding the Political Science major is its lack of applicability. The students feel the major is narrow, and if one doesn't pursue higher education, there aren't many job opportunities available to them. These students desire a multi-disciplinary major and multi-faceted area of study, and they feel their Political Science degree is not offering that to them.

A majority of the students in the Arts and Sciences and STEM fields felt similarly to the Political Science majors in terms of regret. A common theme throughout the results is that students feel other majors, frequently mentioned were those in the Carroll School of Management, set students up better for steady career paths post-graduation. A male Mathematics student at Boston College expresses this:

“Math is really hard and there isn't a clear path to follow post-grad. I should have pursued a business major with a math minor.”

A female Psychology student agrees:

“I wish I would have picked a major that had more tenable job opportunities post-grad.”

A male Sociology student adds:

“Other majors are more likely to get you more secure and better paying jobs.”

A male Economics and Philosophy student summarizes the need for a discipline that balances passion and post-grad opportunity:

“I will stand by my philosophy major till the day that I die. It has always been a passion and that has translated to engaging classes and growth at Boston College. There is not a clear path to any single career, but the skills I have picked up I have loved. Economics on the other side I chose for the pragmatic side of college, so for job opportunities. I recognize

that this is a nice crux to have so I can pursue a very liberal arts major, but I have learned useful and useless information from both degrees.”

This consistent concern for jobs and financial stability truly drives regrets. Students who chose their major for financial reasons feel a lower rate of regret (5.3%) in comparison to students who chose their major for passion reasons (8.4%). At the beginning of college, students often pursue what they are passionate about. By the end of their college career, they realize the need for financial stability. A job post-graduation becomes more beneficial than a major that makes them happy. The struggle to balance both a major one is passionate about and one that offers tenable job opportunities is evident throughout the responses.

When one picks their major has little effect on regret. Of the students who applied to their major/declared their major before stepping foot on BC's campus, 25% now regret their major. Sophomores who had two years of college before deciding on a major had a regret rate of 27.7%. Whether one picks their major early in their BC career or later on does not influence the rate of regret. What is consistent is that those who major in the Liberal Arts/Arts and Sciences have a higher regret rate than those in STEM, Education, Nursing, or Business affiliated fields.

#### Social Class and Major Correlation:

The survey results revealed that almost half of the sample identified themselves as upper middle class (48.4%). The next largest demographic was upper class (26.6%), then middle class (16.1%), lower middle class (4%), lower class (3.2%), and working-class (1.6%). The respondents declared their social class themselves, and it was based primarily on parental income.

#### *Upper Middle Class*

Of those who identify themselves as upper middle class, 56.7% majored in the Arts and Sciences with 44.1% majoring in Economics, and 20% majoring in Political Science. 26.7% majored within the Carroll School of Management, with 56.3% having a concentration in Finance. 11.7% studied disciplines in the STEM field, 5% studied within the Lynch School of Education and Human Development, and 1.7% majored in Nursing in the Connell School of Nursing.

Those who identify as upper middle class had many reasons for choosing their major. 73.3% selected their major for passion or pleasure-related reasons. 65% chose their major for financial or job opportunity reasons. 16.7% selected their major due to parental persuasion. 8.3% chose their major for friend or societal pressure-related reasons. 6.7% chose their major due to how the major/field is represented in the media. Of the 60 students who self-identified as upper middle class, 81.7% are considering or going to pursue higher education post-graduation.

### *Upper Class*

Of the students in the sample who identified themselves as upper class based on their parents' income, 57.6% are majoring in Arts and Sciences, with 26.3% majoring in Economics and 10.5% majoring in Political Science. 18.2% are majoring in the Carroll School of Management, with 100% of those students having a concentration in Finance. 9.1% are majoring in a discipline in the STEM field, and 9.1% are majoring in the Lynch School of Education and Human Development. 6.1% of students are majoring in Nursing.

The reasons why upper-class students choose their major are similar to those who identify as upper middle class. 78.9% chose their major for passion or pleasure-related reasons. 69.7% chose their major for financial or job opportunity-related reasons. Students who were upper class felt more persuaded by friends and societal expectations rather than their parents,

with 15.2% choosing their major due to friend or societal expectations and 12.1% choosing their major due to parental expectations. 12.1% also chose their major based on representation in the media. Of the 33 students who identified as upper class, 84.8% are considering or going to be pursuing higher education post-graduation, which is just slightly higher than the upper middle class's percentage.

### *Middle Class*

Of the students who placed themselves in the middle-class category, 40% were majoring in the Arts and Sciences, a smaller percentage compared to the upper and upper-middle-class groups, with 25% majoring in Economics, and 37.5% majoring in Political Science. 40% of the students were studying within the Carroll School of Management, with 87.5% of those in CSOM having a Finance concentration. 10% of the students studied a discipline within the STEM fields, 5% majored in Nursing, and 5% majored within the Lynch School of Education and Human Development.

Although the areas of study breakdown were slightly different, the reasons why middle-class students chose their major are similar to those who identified themselves as upper middle class and upper class. 75% of students who identified as middle class picked their major for passion or pleasure-related reasons. 65% chose their major for financial or job opportunity-related reasons. This percentage is high compared to the other categories, with 20% of students choosing their major for parental persuasion-related reasons. 10% of students who identified as middle class chose their major for friend or societal expectation-related reasons, and 10% chose their major for how its representation in the media. Of the 20 students who identified themselves as middle class, 90% are considering or are pursuing higher education post-graduation, which is the most significant statistic.

*Lower Middle Class*

Of the students who identified themselves as lower middle class, 80% were majoring in the Arts and Sciences, with 25% majoring in Economics. 20% were students majoring in the Carroll School of Management, with 100% having a concentration in Finance. There were no Lynch School of Education and Human Development, Nursing, or STEM students in this demographic.

For the reasons behind choosing their major, 80% of the students in this category picked their major for passion or pleasure-related reasons. 60% of students chose their major for financial reasons. 40% of students decided their major due to parental persuasion, and 20% declared their major due to friend or societal persuasion. Of the students identifying as lower middle class, 80% are considering pursuing higher education post-graduation.

*Lower Class*

Of the students who identified as lower class, 50% studied disciplines in the Arts and Sciences, and 50% studied in the Carroll School of Management. Again, similar to the lower middle-class students, there were no students studying within LSOEHD, CSON, or STEM-related majors. This is explained by the smaller number of lower-class students in the sample and the popularity of those majors within MCAS and CSOM.

Of the middle-class students, 50% choose their major for passion-related reasons, 25% declare their major for financial and job stability-related reasons, and 25% choose their major due to its representation in the media. Of those in this category, 100% of the students are considering or planning on pursuing higher education after graduation.

*Working Class*

Of those who placed themselves in the working class, 100% of students are studying within the Morrissey College of Arts and Sciences. Again, this is due to the small number of students who identified themselves as working class and how large the Morrissey College of Arts and Sciences is at BC. Of these students, 50% choose their major for passion-related reasons, and 100% are considering or planning to pursue higher education post-graduation.

**Results of Interviews:**

The twelve interviews were conducted in person; each interviewee was selected based on convenience sampling. Because convenience sampling was used, the demographic breakdown isn't very diverse in regard to majors. 58.3% of those who opted into an interview are majoring in the Morrissey College of Arts and Sciences, with 28.6% of those in MCAS majoring in Economics. 25% of those who opted to do interviews were in the Carroll School of Management, with 100% of those students having a concentration in Finance; all three of those in CSOM who interviewed had another concentration or major. Two students (16.7%) who were interviewed fell within the STEM category for their major of choice. There were no Lynch School of Education and Human Development students or Connell School of Nursing students in the sample.

The goal of the interviews was to obtain more personalized reflections regarding respondents' survey answers, decipher what influences senior undergraduate students to pursue their chosen major, and see whether students' opinions on their major have shifted over time. Students during the interview discussed the results of their survey, what they're doing post-graduation, if their major is applicable to their future careers, their satisfaction regarding their major, and their 10-year plan for life. Having the survey results available helped drive the conversation and embedded itself in their long-term plan for life.

**What Drives Major Choice? BC's Business Program**

The interviews were very similar to the survey. Men picked their major predominantly for financial stability and job opportunity reasons, and women declared their major for passion reasons. Additionally, many students declared a minor in CSOM for practicality's sake and because they wanted to take courses in BC's well-renowned business school. Each discipline

within the Carroll School of Management is ranked in the Top 20 nationally, with the Finance major ranked 8th in the United States (Bole, 2022). With this strong reputation, a lot of BC students want to be able to take classes within the school in any way they can. A female Economics student shares this desire when she said:

“I am very happy with the major I declared, I had great professors, and enjoyed every course I took within the Economics department. My biggest regret of college was not pursuing a minor in Finance.”

A female Economics and Biology female student felt similarly when she shared:

“Because of my double major, I didn't have enough room in my schedule to complete a minor. If I had the opportunity, I would have picked up a Finance minor.”

A female in Political Science shares why she decided to minor in CSOM when she says:

“I declared a Leading for Social Impact minor because having a minor in the business school at Boston College is valuable. I really liked the idea of business, but I struggled with math concepts, so I didn't think Finance was the right fit for me. I like leadership and organization and the courses take into account so many things, which I appreciated. I wanted to pick up a minor in CSOM before I graduated, and Leading for Social Impact suited my needs and wants.”

A Computer Science male with a Finance minor shared:

“Finance is great. It talks about financial reasoning, markets, and their influence. The area of study has a lot of intricate pieces that make it up. I learned a lot more from my Finance minor than I thought through both my electives and required courses. I knew CSOM has a good and reputable program, so I wanted to take advantage of that and minor in Finance.”

A male student with a Finance concentration and a Psychology major shared:

“I picked Psychology because of passion related reasons, I found the topic interesting. Psychology is important in regard to my future in Law School because it is important to understand persuasion, arguments, what convinces people, and what turns them off. Finance may not be as applicable in law school, but I picked Finance because it is the most prestigious of the programs within the Carroll School [of Management]; I also feel it is important to have financial literacy.”

As demonstrated by the survey results and the interviews, many students desire to take courses within the Carroll School of Management. Of those in the Carroll School, students are relatively satisfied with their experience within CSOM. As the survey results demonstrated, those in CSOM who regret their major (as the results showed predominantly Finance) want to switch disciplines within the business school rather than leave the Carroll School of Management entirely. When asking students what drives their desire for a CSOM major or minor other than the program's reputation, the results differed depending on the student. The majority felt that having a business background and being knowledgeable about the stock market and financial literacy is pertinent in today's world and is beneficial information to have. Besides genuine interest in the topic, a common theme among those who majored in CSOM, specifically Finance, was post-graduation earnings.

Post-graduation earnings and lack of financial stability post-graduation were frequently mentioned in the survey as an influence on major choice. The interview results reiterate that economic stability and job opportunities post-graduation drive one's choice of major. A male majoring in Finance and Marketing discusses his reasoning behind his choice of major when he shares:

“I picked Marketing for passion reasons. It added a creative element to my education that I wasn't anticipating obtaining in CSOM. I picked Finance because of the really strong Finance program at BC, and expected earnings post-grad are highest for Finance majors.”

A female CSOM student with concentrations in Finance and Accounting for the CPA

demonstrates a similar train of thought, when she shares:

“I looked up salaries for jobs associated with certain majors that I was interested in pursuing, and realized Finance would be useful for said jobs, so I declared Finance as my second concentration.”

It is compelling to see money as a factor in major choices. Not always, but a considerable number of students are driven towards Finance degrees because of the expected earnings and high salaries post-graduation. Additionally, CSOM's reputation influences students to apply to CSOM or obtain minors in CSOM during their time at Boston College.

#### Marriage & Career Path: Parental Influence on Cutting Work Hours

When asking students about their 10-year-plan, the correlation between marriage and career was evident. The majority of women who participated in interviews mentioned cutting down on their work hours when they started a family. The interviews showed that whether or not someone wants to leave work once they have children has a strong correlation with what their parents did in their relationship. If one has a stay-at-home parent, one will be more willing to follow suit and stay at home when they have kids. One woman, a Political Science major at Boston College, demonstrated this desire when she shared:

“I want to be financially independent during my twenties, but I would love to take a break from my career to raise my kids if possible. I know this could be a financial strain

on my future husband and I may not have the opportunity to do this, but my mom didn't work when she raised us, and I would love to do the same".

A female Economics student shared a similar story when she shared:

"I anticipate being the breadwinner at some point in my life, while my spouse pursues higher education, but I hope to cut down on my work after they graduate, so we can get married and start a family".

Another female Psychology student shares this when she states:

"I intend to adopt kids of older ages. Depending on who I adopt, their needs, and my husband's financial status, I would be willing to drop down to part-time work if it is financially viable".

These three quotes were shared by female students who had stay-at-home mothers when they grew up. If someone has both parents working during their childhood, they will be less inclined to cut down on work hours once they have children. This phenomenon is exhibited in a quote by a female International Studies student when she said:

"My mom owns her own business, and my dad traveled a lot for work, so I went to an elementary school with morning care. My mom said she would always feel bad about not picking me up earlier, but it never bothered me. I never considered not working. As of right now, taking off work is not a luxury I think I will have. Also, men never consider taking time off work for their children, so why should I?"

A female Communications student felt similarly when she shared:

"I want to continue working. My mom was the breadwinner of my family so it [working] was something that was always ingrained in me. Seeing her in that role as a breadwinner, whether you have kids or not, shows women are capable of doing both [having a career

and children]. I never felt my dad or stepdad was “less of a man” because he wasn’t the sole provider financially”.

A male Computer Science student shared:

“I hope my spouse will work. If my wife makes sufficiently more, I would be okay staying at home if necessary. It just depends on the dynamic. My mom worked, and I would want me and my spouse to do the same.”

There is a strong correlation between whether or not a student’s parents worked and whether students would be inclined to work once they have children. Of those in the interviews who shared they had one stay-at-home parent, the interview results demonstrated it was the mother who was stay-at-home, and they felt more open to being a stay-at-home parent when the time comes, or at least lessen their work hours. For men, the equivalent was allowing their spouse to stay at home once children were a part of the picture.

#### Parental Influence on One’s Major

Another question in the survey was whether or not students are influenced by their parents when declaring their major. This wasn’t a prevalent factor for students, but in the interviews, two students touched upon their parents' influence on their major, so it made sense to address it. Both students had different experiences, with one having parents who guided them in deciding their major, and one declaring their major based on what their parents did during their college experience. A Finance and Accounting for the CPA female student discussed her parents' influence when she said:

“I declared Accounting for the CPA because both of my parents are accountants. The major was about what I expected; it was a pretty standard core for accounting, and the classes were how I anticipated, but I hadn’t realized how many credits I needed to fulfill

the CPA requirement. A lot of APs rolled over which made the process easier, but 150 credits was definitely harder to obtain than I thought it would be.”

A Communications female student with minors in Film and Marketing had a different experience, with her father's struggles declaring a major influencing her choice. She shares this during her interview:

“My dad helped me pick my major. He had trouble deciding what he wanted to study, so it set him on a bad path, and caused him to go back to school a bunch. He was very involved in both my sister's and my major selection. He felt that Communications was well suited for me after doing research because it bridged my love for marketing and media, and my interest in developing my interpersonal skills. He guided me toward my major and he felt it was best for me because it was a major that he felt I would like, but also could be applicable in many different ways because it isn't super specific. My minors helped me take more courses I found most interesting and catered toward my specific interests and career goals”.

Parents can be influential in dramatically different ways. The two interviews indicated that parents influenced their children's major choices; these interviews indicate how differently they can make an impact. A child's first role model is usually their parents or the person who raises them, so when a person decides to follow a similar career path as their parents, it isn't very shocking. In another respect, parents often know their children the best, so they can guide them to make decisions that will most benefit them, and these two interviews offered both of these different perspectives.

### Higher Education

As the survey demonstrated, women are more influenced by financial and job opportunity-based reasons for pursuing higher education (66.7%) than they are influenced by passion-based reasons (33.3%). Men are also more likely to pursue higher education for financially related reasons, but the gap between financial and job opportunity-based reasons (60%) and passion (51.4%) based reasons is significantly smaller than it is for women. The survey results were quite evident in the interviews. Of the two men in the interviews pursuing higher education, both were driven mainly by passion-based reasons. A Biochemistry student who intends to go to medical school post-graduation discusses his passions for the medical field:

“Biochemistry was the best major for medical school. It picks up all of the med school requirements without going outside of my major. It made the most sense to declare biochem because I am a transfer student, so not all of my courses transferred over. Medical school was always something I wanted to pursue so I declared my major with this career path in mind. I cannot imagine doing anything else. I would love to either go into oncology, orthopedic surgery, specifically shoulders and sports medicine, or cardiology during my residency. I hope to work until I stop loving what I do, which I don't think will happen.”

A male Finance and Psychology student intending to go to law school felt similar passion, when he shared:

“Law school is something I have always wanted to pursue. I want to be an advocate for others, and I feel that law is the most powerful vehicle for creating effective advocacy. My goal is after law school to work as a state or federal prosecutor, clerk for a judge at some point, and hopefully work my way up to partner at a firm.”

Only two interviewees were set on pursuing higher education post-graduation. Of those who were on the fence about higher education, their contemplation was for similar reasons. Many students feel that higher education isn't necessary for their career path, but if their future employer were to fund their pursuit of higher education, they would be open to it. Most of those who are on the fence are considering a potential MBA if their future career path deems it necessary. An Economics female student discusses this when she says:

“I am considering getting my MBA, it is not out of the picture. In a perfect world, I would find a job that would pay for my MBA. An MBA would lead to better job prospects, it provides a good title, and I like school a lot so the additional education would be worth it.”

A male Computer Science student feels similarly when he shares:

“I don't have any intent to pursue higher education now. Potentially farther down the line I would get my master's in computer science, or get my MBA to help move me up the managerial ladder”.

Another student, a female Economics and Biology student, also mentioned obtaining her MBA:

“I'd consider getting my MBA, or a master's in biology depending on which would better benefit my career. I want to pursue Biotech Venture Capital, so both would be applicable. Just depends on what my company prefers.”

The interviews demonstrate that there is an association between pursuing higher education, specifically an MBA, and earning higher wages. The interviewees are currently not in business school but view an MBA as a way to elevate their careers and indirectly increase their salaries. This correlation between business and financial stability is ingrained in these students and is taken into consideration when deciding on what discipline to pursue higher education in.

### Societal Expectations & Students' Ten Year Plans

Every student discussed their ten-year plan during the interview. This question was intended to hopefully see what societal expectations are placed on current college-aged students and what milestones they feel they need to achieve within ten years. Ten years from now, the interviewees would be thirty-one or thirty-two years of age.

This question produced deep conversation, and every student had some sort of overlap. For example, all students mentioned marriage during the ten-year plan question. Almost every student wants to be married ten years from now. Whether this is due to societal expectations of when one should be married or just the students' personal goals, they all had discussed being married within this set timeframe. Only one student didn't feel a drive for marriage. An Economics and Biology female student discussed this in her interview when she shared:

“My ten year plan is dependent on whether or not I stay in the U.S. If I don't get a sponsorship, I'll probably head to London and get my master's in biology, then hopefully pursue Biotechnology Venture Capital. For marriage, whatever happens happens. I don't really want kids, and I want to work for a decent amount of time, so I don't need to think about it right now.”

Besides this outlier, every other student in the survey was set on marriage and wanted to be married by the time they were thirty-one or thirty-two/at the end of their ten-year plan. Most of the students are committed to having kids in the future, so their desire to get married earlier was evidently in effect. Career goals, marriage, and children drive students' decisions because there is a societal expectation to get married by one's late twenties and start having kids by one's early to mid-thirties. It has been instilled in all of these students but has shifted over time, with people

now getting married and having children later. Certain age expectations persist. A male

Computer Science student adheres to these expectations in his ten-year plan when he shares:

“I want to work hard till I’m twenty-six or twenty-seven, and hopefully get married by the end of my twenties, or the beginning of my thirties. Ideally, I’d have my first kid by thirty-three. I hope at that point I have a job where I am settled, talented, and maybe manage people. Hopefully in a higher position of power than where I am now.”

Students unknowingly adhere to these societal milestones. The interviewee didn’t even recognize that he was adhering to societal expectations; he was rather discussing the time frame he made for himself. People's 10-year-plans often adhere to what society deems the norm, so they don’t fall behind. This is a burdensome mindset. These interviews have demonstrated the pressure students have placed on themselves to hit goals within a set time. Another student, a female Finance and Accounting for CPA student feels similar and places similar expectations on herself when she expresses:

“I want to work in Private Equity while I obtain my CPA. When I turn 28, I will switch to accounting, and open my own accounting firm. This will be a good time to switch, because I will be busy during tax season, but I can work while I have kids. Ideally my spouse would work full time and I would work part-time.”

Having the age set on certain milestones can be beneficial but can also be detrimental to one’s mental health. It is good to be driven and have set goals but can be harmful if one can't achieve their goals on time. It is tough to balance. Due to the societal expectations surrounding higher education, marriage, and when one has children, many of the interviewees' plans overlap.

**Discussion:**

Men and women had different reasons leading them to their discipline of study. As hypothesized, women were driven more by passion and men pursued their majors for financial stability and job opportunities. The survey showed that men are less likely to pursue higher education; higher education often increases salary, so it was a compelling correlation. Of those considering pursuing higher education, both men and women's main reason was economic prosperity; men were more influenced by passion/pleasure than women. Men were also two times more likely to pick their major due to societal/friend expectations (15.6%) than women (8%). Men are also more likely to declare their major due to parental persuasion (17.8%) than women (14.7%). Research shows that men often create their career paths based on what their father/paternal figure did during their upbringing; the results showing parental, social, and gender roles affecting men were anticipated (Kniveton, 2004). Gender strongly affects one's career path. Social class had limited influence on survey participants.

Only a minute percentage of students regret their major, but of those who did, most were in the Arts and Sciences and chose their major for passion reasons. The students who regretted their major were mainly concerned about job opportunities and financial stability post-graduation. They are trying to use their major to enter the job market and now feel their major is "too narrow", doesn't have a "set path", lacks "tenable job opportunities", or necessitates higher education. The students were all stressed due to the lack of a job, and that is where the regrets stem from. Students within the Lynch School of Education and the Connell School of Nursing had no regrets regarding their discipline of study. This could be related to the lack of CSON and LSOEHD students in the survey, but as research demonstrates, the jobs with the lowest unemployment rates are nurses and teachers. Miscellaneous Education has an unemployment rate

of 0.6%, General Education is at 1.8%, Secondary Education is at 2.6%, Special Education is at 2.7%, and Early Childhood Education is at 3.1%. Nursing has a 1.3% unemployment rate. Every percentage is below the current federal unemployment rate in the U.S. of ~3.7% (Statista, 2023). Research and results show that the jobs with the highest unemployment rate often have the lowest rate of regret, aligning with the results. Many students' regrets are driven by being close to graduation and not picking a major with more secure job opportunities. Those with more job options feel lower regret rates toward their choice of major.

Social class did not have a significant influence on the results. There was a small portion of students who identified themselves as lower middle, lower, or working class (8.9%) of total respondents but the correlation between major and reasons behind major were similar to those who identified as upper, upper middle, or middle class. Originally the hypothesis stated that those in the upper classes would have more accessibility and financial freedom to pursue higher education post-graduation, and would pursue majors for economic reasons, but the results refuted this. All social classes had a large percentage of the demographic considering higher education (>80%). The classes with the highest percentage of students were middle-class students (90%), lower-class students (100%), and working-class students (100%). The upper-class, upper-middle-class, and lower-middle-class students were below 90%. Additionally, all students are considering higher education for a multitude of reasons. Research shows that class more often impacts the college process and what college one will get accepted into rather than the discipline of study once students get there. Private versus public high school education, SAT and ACT preparatory courses, and social class are more influential during the college application process rather than the college experience and post-college experience (Higher Education Data Stories, 2021).

The interview results did not deviate from the survey but were a collection of personal reflections stemming from the survey results. What was most compelling about the interviews that added to the survey results was the discussion of parenthood and career and each student's 10-year plans. The research and the interviews demonstrated that women were more inclined to pause their careers for the sake of children in comparison to men. Of the women who were not putting their careers on pause for children most had a working mother in the household. The research demonstrates that people choose their work/life balance similarly to what their parents did when they were growing up. Women are more likely to emulate their lives after the parent with whose gender identity they align with. For females, that means if their mother stays at home, they will follow a similar path (Jungen, 2008). For men, it is following a similar career path their father does.

Another unexpected finding was students at BC wanted a degree within CSOM due to the school's reputation rather than expanding their business and management knowledge. This wasn't taken into account when starting the research, so it is intriguing to see how much this unaccounted-for factor could have skewed the results. Schools with equally reputable business schools and liberal arts schools would not experience this potential skew of results.

**Implications:**

Social Learning Theory is evident in why students pursue both the major they do and higher education. Social learning theory is that “learning occurs through observation, imitation, and modeling and is influenced by factors such as attention, motivation, attitudes, and emotions” (Cherry, 2022). The subcategory of this is career decision-making theory. The three competing theories of career decision-making are matching persons to placement, identifying traits of personality and skill, and interest necessary to complete the job. Students consider all things and then match themselves to an appropriate career path where they will thrive and succeed. Social and cultural factors can influence this, so it is important to be aware of the biases in one’s life (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997). The results of the survey and interviews demonstrate this, with students picking their major, or choosing to pursue higher education for reasons relating to their parents, friends, or societal pressures that have been placed on them. There was a minority of people in the survey and the interviews, but students feel outside pressures on their future career path.

Social capital theory is another theory evident in the results of the survey. The sociological theory of cultural capital is "institutionalized, i.e., widely shared, high-status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goals, and credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion". Social class was not as impactful of a predictor as anticipated in the results of the survey, but Boston College is a well-endowed university. Research shows those who are socially privileged thrive and flourish in an educational setting. There is often a strong correlation between social privilege and academic success, but in this survey, there was no significant correlation (Kingston, 2001). No matter the class, students were all inclined to pursue higher education and were pursuing vastly different majors. No specific students were asked

directly about their grades in the survey and how well they are doing at Boston College, but with the academic prestige BC has, all the students are talented in the classroom.

Gender Socialization Theory was also prevalent in the survey. Gender socialization is the process of developing, refining, and learning to 'do' gender through gender norms and roles as they interact with key agents of socialization, such as their family, social networks, and other institutions (Hoominfar, 2021). This process comes into effect at an early age for most individuals, with children becoming aware of their gender and who they are by around three years old. The social construct of gender places individuals into certain boxes and can force them to adhere to stereotypes associated with their gender (Guy-Evans, 2023). The correlation between gender and major was evident within the survey and interview results. Men predominantly picked their major for financial stability reasons, and women picked their major predominantly for passion reasons. Whether this be related to the stereotype of men being the "breadwinner", or other gender stereotyping factors cannot be determined by the given results, but it is compelling to see the correlation between areas of study and gender are significantly correlating.

**Limitations:**

As discussed in the methodology, there are limitations to this research. The seniors participating in the survey and interviews are students at Boston College. Again, Boston College is a liberal art, Jesuit, mid-sized university. It is a predominantly white institution, with 34.7% of students identifying as AHANA and 4% of students being International Students. The student body is also affluent with a minority of students (39%) being on partial or full financial aid and a majority of students identifying as middle class or upper social class, as demonstrated through the survey results and BC's demographics (*Facts and Figures - about BC - Boston College*, n.d.).

The data is quite limited. Had the survey been sent to a larger population of Boston College seniors, the results may have changed but the mixed method approach of both a survey and convenience sampling interviews intended to rectify potential skew in results. If this research were to be re-conducted, it would be best to do a bigger sample size for the survey, as well as more interviewees. More data would give well-rounded results.

This study is also only applicable to Boston College. Had this research been done at an HBCU, a state school, a public university, a technological university, etc. the results would drastically change. Due to BC's liberal arts education, the major and minor options can be deemed limited compared to other, more vast universities and colleges and more expansive compared to smaller universities, which could have influenced the results of the survey and interviews. Also, BC is a prestigious university, but specifically, the Carroll School of Management and its Finance program are reputable. If this research was conducted at a university where the internal colleges were more equal, there may have been fewer rates of regret towards not picking up a business minor for students studying within the liberal arts.

Overall, the methods used for this study were well suited, and the limitations were unrelated to how the conducting of the research. The mixed method approach, utilizing both open-response and multiple-choice survey questions, as well as supplementary interviews was the most convenient way of obtaining necessary information. Mixed methods would be the best way to collect information for future researchers. The one adjustment that would benefit the researchers is related to the reasons why students selected their major. An “other/not stated” option was available on the survey. Supplying a textbox to explain the other reasons behind their selected major would have been beneficial and added another element to the research that this particular study is lacking.

**Conclusion:**

The research intended to answer two pertinent questions: (1) What influences senior undergraduate students to pursue their chosen major? (2) Have their opinions on their discipline of choice shifted in retrospect since deciding their major early on in their college career? The two social influences impacting students' reasons for their major were gender and social class. Gender had a much more evident influence on career path and major than social class did. Students in all social classes studied within all fields, and all had high rates of pursuing higher education post-graduation. Major and social class did not have a significant correlation whereas gender and major had a more significant correlation. Women picked their major for passion-related reasons, and men declared their major for financial stability and job opportunity-related reasons. For the second question, the regret rates did not correlate with how early students selected their major but rather what major they selected. Whether they had applied to the major or selected their major during their freshman, sophomore, or junior year had limited influence on the regret rate. The regret rates were associated with what discipline the student chose. The Arts and Sciences were the most heavily regretted, with the top three most regretted majors being Political Science, Economics, and Finance. These are also the most populous majors at Boston College, but regret rates were declared based on the percentage of students who took the survey within each discipline and of those students whether or not they felt regret towards their major.

## Appendix

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