

Students' Expected Levels of Debt and Their Academic and Career Decisions

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Abstract

Current literature suggests students' levels of undergraduate debt impact their academic and career decisions. We investigated the impact of students' total levels of expected undergraduate debt on their choice of major and plans to pursue postgraduate education. Collecting data at a liberal arts college using random sampling and an online survey, we tested the following hypotheses: 1) Students with higher total levels of expected undergraduate debt are more likely to major in a field with higher average salaries than students with lower total levels of expected undergraduate debt 2) Students with lower total levels of expected undergraduate debt are more likely to plan on pursuing a postgraduate education program than students with higher total levels of expected undergraduate debt. Our results indicate that students with higher total levels of expected undergraduate debt are *less* likely to major in fields with higher average salaries than students with lower total levels of expected undergraduate debt, and students with lower total levels of expected undergraduate debt are *no more likely* to plan on pursuing postgraduate education program than students with higher total levels of expected undergraduate debt. An unusual feature of the research is our measurements of students' "expected" total levels of debt, rather than their definite accumulated debt, and their "perceived" future plans, rather than their definite course of action. We recommend future studies conduct a longitudinal study comparing students' views at different times prior to and after graduation from college.

In wake of the global economic crisis, higher education institutions have struggled to increase their net profits, and student enrollment rates have declined as a result of depressed family incomes. In order to offset weak revenue growth and increase program investments, tuition rates across the United States rose an average of nine percent between the years of 2009 and 2011 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009-2012). The growing financial burden of tuition has led many students to rely on student loans in order to afford and attend college. In response to this demand, the federal government increased the number of student loans given, raising the federal government's outstanding balance of student loans from \$107 billion in 2008 to \$516 billion in 2012 (Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, 2012). In light of the rising financial strain on students, studies have emerged showing the effects of student educational loans on their financial knowledge, outlook, and behavior.

Scholars investigating factors that influence student financial behavior found that parental guidance and socioeconomic status (Jing, Serido, Soyeon, Tang 2011; Padilla-Walker, Nelson, Carroll 2012), financial knowledge from economic classes or life experiences (Jing et al. 2011; Perry, Morris 2005), and owning a credit card (Roberts and Jones 2001) all affect student levels of debt and future financial outlook. To add to the body of knowledge regarding student finances, our study focused on undergraduate debt and its effects on students' expected academic and career plans.

Previous studies about student debt and student decisions have examined the association between the burden of debt and students' socioeconomic levels (Leppel, Williams, Waldauer 2001; Baum, O'Malley 2002; Paulsen 2002; Hazel and Munro, 2003; Burdman 2005; Dwyer, Hodson, McCloud 2013), choice of major (Leppel et al., 2001; Ketter 2012), advanced education decisions (Heller 2001; Millet 2003; Zhang 2010), and career choices (Baum and O'Malley 2003; Rothstein, Rouse 2011).

Socioeconomic Status, Debt, and Choice of Major

Education has long been associated with the elite who have the money and resources to afford it. Today, however, Americans perceive post-secondary education as meant for everyone: a Gallup poll reported that 92% of parents in 2010 thought their child would attend college, versus 82% in 1995, and 57% in 1982 (Gallup Student Poll 2010). As the demand for employees with higher education has risen, college tuition has also risen. A clear example of this trend can be observed at a small, private liberal arts school in the Upper Midwest - the location of our study - where tuition, room, and board prices rose 65% between the years of 2004 and 2012 (St. Olaf College CDS Summary: *St. Olaf Tuition and Fees*).

Financial debt from these elevated costs has become a serious concern for many parents and college-age students. However, many students are cognizant of their economic

means; low-income students and those attending low-cost institutions are more likely to be loan adverse, and borrow less so as not to be burdened (Baum 2002; Burdman 2005). Low-income students tend to choose schools with lower tuition rates and are more likely to complete vocational school than a four-year institution. Middle-class students, on the other hand, are more likely to attend a four-year college and aspire to attain a master's and other advanced degrees (Paulsen 2002). A study conducted in Britain found that students who were more willing to incur debt were often middle class and expected to attend a university (Hazel 2003). Students who had no choice but to incur debt in pursuit of their education had lower incomes and few alternatives to loans (Hazel 2003).

Past literature also notes that the socioeconomic status of parents plays a role in students' choice of major. Women of higher socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to major in business, while the opposite is true for males (Leppel 2001). Leppel also noted that students who believe wealth is important are more likely to major in business than other students. Majors that often require incurring greater debt – the natural sciences, law, and business - lead to jobs which require additional schooling after undergraduate schooling (Leppel 2001). Unfortunately, low-income and minority students miss out on opportunities due to their loan aversion (Burdman 2005). In order to attain educational and career opportunities, debt cannot be avoided.

The literature that we collected states that the difference in students' likelihood of accumulating debt is based on their financial background. As shown in the studies previously discussed, the majority of literature focuses on the relationships between students' perceived socioeconomic status, academic integration, and choice of major. The few studies investigating correlations between student debt and choice of major have found expected earnings and probability of success have more of an influence on students' choice of major than the prospect of accumulating debt (Cannings, Mahseredjian, Montmarquette 2002). For example, students from a higher socioeconomic status were able to explore majors linked with both higher and

lower-paying salaries, while students from a lower socioeconomic status felt more pressure to choose majors correlated with higher paying jobs (Cannings et al. 2002).

In light of the recent economic shift, students are more likely than ever before to take out loans in order to pursue higher education. Thus, debt is now a significant issue that deserves due attention. Based on these previously conducted studies, we proposed the following hypothesis:
H1: Students with higher levels of total expected undergraduate debt are more likely to major in fields with higher average salaries than students with lower levels of total expected undergraduate debt.

Student Debt and Graduate School Decisions

The decision to attend graduate school or another form of advanced education is based on a multitude of factors such as degree expectations, choice of major, classroom performance, and Grade Point Average (GPA) (Heller 2001; Millet 2003). Prior research investigating the effects of debt on graduate school attendance provided mixed results. One study analyzing 1993 data from the Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study, collected by the National Center for Education Statistics, reported debt as having little impact on whether or not students attend graduate school (Heller 2001). Other studies conducted using the same data found that students with more undergraduate debt were less likely to apply to graduate school than students with less undergraduate debt (Millet 2003; Zhang 2010).

Zhang's study distinguished between public and private four year college students; the study found an increase of \$1,000 in debt for public school students reduced students' likelihood of attending graduate school by 2.7%, whereas the same increase had an insignificant effect on private school students' decisions. Moreover, Millet (2003) was able to distinguish the debt level at which students' graduate school decisions began to change. The study showed that those with debt levels of \$100 to \$4,999 were not swayed in their decision to apply to graduate

schools. Those with debt levels of \$5,000 to \$9,999, however, had 1.6 times lower odds of applying to graduate or first professional school (like, pharmacy, dentistry, or engineering). Zhang's study tested not only graduate school, but also master's programs, doctoral programs, MBA's, and first professional program attendance.

For public college students, a \$1,000 debt increase had no effect on master's program attendance, but decreased doctoral program attendance by 0.9% and MBA and first professional school attendance by 2.1%. Private college students showed different results: no effect was seen on master's or doctoral program attendance, but MBA and first professional school attendance decreased by the same percentage as public college students.

Though these studies offer valuable insight on the effects debt has on students' advanced education decisions, it is important to keep in mind that the Baccalaureate and Beyond data, on which all of these studies are based, was collected prior to the Higher Education Act of 1992. This act implemented higher borrowing limits for students, and opened federal loan programs to more borrowers. These changes may provide different results from what these most recent studies describe. As of now (2013), no further studies have been published using more recent data. To address this gap, our study investigated the relationship between undergraduate debt and the pursuit of postgraduate education using a cohort of current students. Though our sample is specific to one liberal arts college, it may be similar to other liberal arts colleges. Based on correlations found by Zhang (2010), we proposed the following hypothesis:

H2: Students with lower total levels of expected undergraduate debt are more likely to plan on pursuing a postgraduate education program than students with higher total levels of expected undergraduate debt.

Student Debt and Career Choices

Studies investigating the association between levels of student undergraduate debt and career choices produced contradictory results. This has resulted in a body of knowledge with little consensus.

Baum and O'Malley examined the effects of increased use of undergraduate student loans on students' perceptions of debt. Results indicated that the majority of student borrowers believed their loans "were well worth the personal growth and career opportunities gained from a college education" (Baum, O'Malley 2003:15). Additionally, the study found that most students had not changed their career plans as a result of debt via student loans (Baum, O'Malley 2003). However, the skewed demographics of the study (67% female and 73% white) do not adequately represent the larger population of student borrowers, and calls into the question the generalizability of the results. Furthermore, the fact that the data is ten years old limits the present day generalizability of the results. Our study can contribute to the current body of knowledge by providing updated information on a possible association between student debt levels and career choices.

A more recent study concluded that the presence of educational debt significantly impacts students' career choices. This study compared the educational and career decisions of 8,641 students and recent graduates of an anonymous, prestigious university before and after the 2002 implementation of a "no-loans policy" (Rothstein, Rouse 2011). Under the "no-loans policy," financial aid awards replaced loans with grants (Rothstein, Rouse 2011). The researchers discovered that after the implementation of the policy, the majority of aid recipients shifted from industries with high average salaries to industries with lower average salaries, while there was little change in the industry composition of jobs taken by students not on aid (Rothstein, Rouse 2011). There was also a notable increase in the share of aid recipients taking jobs in nonprofit, government, and education sectors (Rothstein, Rouse 2011). The researchers estimated that an extra \$10,000 in student debt reduces the likelihood that an individual will take

a job in nonprofits, government, or education by about five to six percentage points (Rothstein, Rouse 2011). However, the sample was taken from only one prestigious university, and the study's findings may not be generalizable. Our research expands the current body of knowledge on the relationship between students' expected educational debt and career choices by providing a liberal arts school perspective.

Focus and Direction of Study

The breadth of literature about student undergraduate debt and student academic and career choices guided our investigation of relationships between levels of student undergraduate debt, choice of major and post-secondary education enrollment. The majority of studies investigating these relationships took place at large state universities. In contrast, we conducted this study at a small, liberal arts college. Keeping this distinction in mind, we expected the results of our study to both support and challenge findings within the current body of knowledge.

Methods

This study was part of a larger study on college students and money that used an online survey to gather data. The online survey was sent to a random sample of students at a small, liberal arts college in the Upper Midwest in the fall of 2013. This method allowed us to reach a large number of students in a short period of time.

Sampling

Our target population was the 3,081-member student body at a small, liberal arts college in the Upper Midwest. The student body was 84% white, and 56% female. We excluded the following students from our target population: students currently away on off-campus program, international students, students under the age of eighteen, students twenty-five years or older, part-time students, students who are primarily employees at the college and take classes as an

employee benefit, students who participated in our research focus groups, and students enrolled in our Sociology/Anthropology Foundations of Social Science Research course.

We used a simple, random sampling method so each individual in our target population, not including the excluded students, had an equal and independent probability of being chosen (Patten 2011). This sampling method ensured our sample was representative and our results generalizable to our target population of students at the small liberal arts college (Neuman 2012). When considering our sample size, we relied on Neuman's assertion that "a population size between 1,000-10,000 requires a sample ratio of 10%" (2012:167). When determining sample size, we also considered the relative homogeneity of the student body at the small, liberal arts college and came to the consensus that a smaller sample size was acceptable. The director of the college's Institutional Review Board completed the sampling process by drawing the final sample using a computer program and created an email alias so the names of participants remained unknown. Our attempted sample size was 530 students. In an effort to achieve this number, we provided an incentive of \$20 gift cards to the college bookstore. The gift cards were given to ten randomly selected participants. However, with a response rate of 43%, our final sample size was only 229 students.

In our final sample, 27% (62) of respondents were male, while 66% (154) were female. The sample included students from all years in school; Freshmen comprised 25% (57), Sophomores 28% (65), Juniors 18% (41), and Seniors 24% (55).

Variables

Our first hypothesis states that students with higher levels of total expected undergraduate debt are more likely to major in a field with higher average salaries. We measured the independent variable, *students' total expected level of undergraduate debt*, using the survey question: About how much total educational debt (student loans) do you think you'll have by the time you graduate? This question had seven response categories ranging from \$0

to \$50,000 or more. We later collapsed these response categories into three groups (no debt, \$1-\$29,999, and \$30,000 or more) in order to run statistical tests. We measured the dependent variable, *students' choice of major*, using the survey question: What is your major(s)? This question was open ended, and students could list up to two majors. We coded students' majors as either "high paying" or "not." In order to code students' majors in this way, we used lists from previous literature that stated which majors were in fields with higher average salaries, and which majors were in fields with lower average salaries (Rothstein and Rouse 2011; Thomas 2000). We also asked students the extent to which they considered eight factors (*personal interest, natural talent, ease of adding major, parental influence, teaching style of department professors, correlation to job in desired field of work, and correlation to a high-paying job*) when choosing their major. The level of agreement-disagreement with each factor was measured on a six point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*.

Our second hypothesis states that students with lower levels of total expected undergraduate debt are more likely to plan on pursuing a postgraduate education program. We measured the independent variable, *students' total expected level of undergraduate debt*, using the same questions and coding techniques as our first hypothesis. We measured the dependent variable, *plans to pursue postgraduate education*, using the survey question: Do you plan to pursue some type of post-graduate education at some point after graduating from St. Olaf? We offered three response categories for this question: *yes, no, undecided*.

Validity

In order to achieve measurement validity, we ensured that all aspects of the conceptual definition were captured by the operational definition. By fully specifying the entire content of our conceptual definition, our research achieved content validity (Neuman 2012). Our research sought to investigate the relationships between students' expected total levels of undergraduate

debt and their academic and career plans. In order to fully investigate these relationships, we identified our variables as *students' total expected undergraduate debt levels, choice of major, and plans to pursue postgraduate education*. To firmly establish the content of our conceptual definition, we conducted a ninety-minute focus group with students at the small, liberal arts college. The focus group allowed us to consider our conceptual definition and ensured that our team's understanding of our variables matched the focus group participants' understanding of these variables. We operationalized our conceptual definition by selecting specific survey questions that measured all of its components (Neuman 2012).

To achieve concurrent validity, we ensured our measurement indicators were highly associated with already existing measurement indicators (Neuman 2012). For example, to appropriately measure levels of debt, we made sure our response categories were similar to those utilized in previous studies.

Reliability

Several steps were taken to increase our study's levels of reliability. We developed unambiguous survey questions and made sure each of our survey questions measured only one of our variables (Neuman 2012). We made our survey question measurements more reliable by having them measure our constructs at the most precise levels possible, and by including several, refined response categories (Neuman 2012). We increased reliability by using multiple indicators to measure our constructs. One indicator was our survey questions and another was a focus group that assessed the salient characteristics that play into students' decisions to pursue a particular major and postgraduate education.

To further refine our questions and eliminate ambiguity within our survey, a pilot study was conducted. This led to rewording of questions and increased conceptual clarification of constructs. The survey was reviewed by other students and professional researchers who offered feedback on how to make all response categories exhaustive, distinctive, and clear to

the respondent - important for dependable measures (Neuman 2012). Though perfect reliability is rarely achieved, we took all measures within our means to increase the consistency and stability of our results (Neuman 2012).

Ethics

Our study was approved by the IRB and deemed in accordance with the ethical principles of beneficence, respect, and trust (St. Olaf, 2013). Our study adhered to the IRB's ethical standards and strived to minimize the potential for undue harm. To ensure all participants gave informed consent, we included an attachment in our online survey that explained its voluntary nature, the procedures involved, and the risks of potential stress and intrusiveness. We also made sure not to include special populations in our sample, meaning individuals under the age of eighteen were excluded (Neuman 2012). We achieved voluntary consent by explicitly informing participants they could discontinue the survey at any time or choose not to answer questions they perceived as physically or psychologically threatening. Anonymity was achieved by having a third party select our final sample and create an email alias so we never received the final names of participants

Survey Results

We used univariate statistical tests to measure the frequencies of our independent variable (*expected total educational debt level*) and both dependent variables (*choice of major*, and *plans to pursue a post graduate education program*). We also performed bivariate statistical tests on both hypotheses and controlled for gender, year, and race-ethnicity.

Univariate Analysis

We asked students to report their expected total educational debt and had respondents choose from seven categories ranging from \$0 to \$50,000 or more. We later collapsed these categories into three groups (no debt, \$1-\$29,999, and \$30,000 or more) in order to run statistical tests on our hypotheses. The results indicated that 42% of St. Olaf students expected to have no educational debt, 33% expected debt levels ranging from \$1-\$29,999, and 25% expected levels of \$30,000 or more.

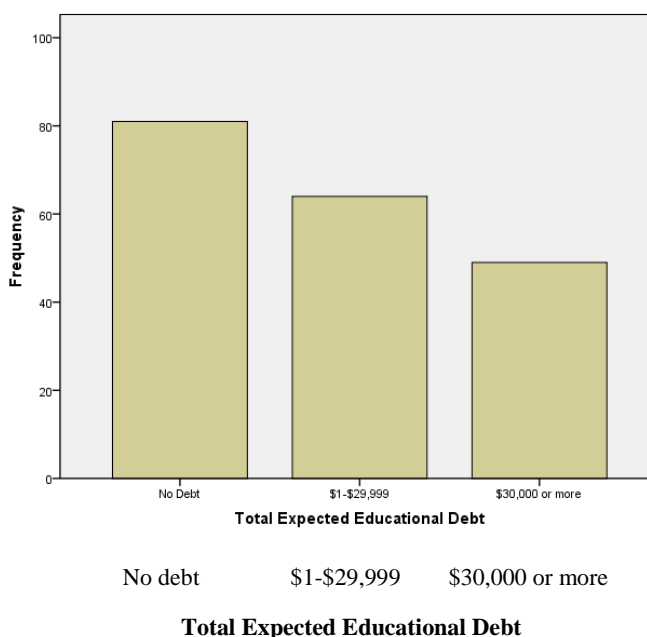


Figure 1: Frequency of Total Expected Educational Debt by Time of Graduation

We also found that the majority of students (53%) chose a major linked with a higher paying salary, and 95% of students planned to pursue some form of postgraduate education. Of students planning to pursue a postgraduate education program, 44% planned on attending immediately after graduation, and 45% planned on attending one to two years after graduation. Furthermore, 36% planned to pursue some type of first professional school; 10% planned to

pursue a graduate school focused on finance, business, or economics; 31% planned to pursue some other form of graduate program.

Hypothesis Analysis

Hypothesis 1: Students with higher total levels of expected undergraduate debt are more likely to major in fields with higher average salaries than those with lower levels of total expected undergraduate debt.

We used a Chi-Squared test of independence to analyze the relationship between total expected undergraduate debt levels and choice of major. The results, presented in Table 1, indicate a weak, significant, negative relationship between students' levels of undergraduate debt and their likelihood of majoring in fields with higher average salaries ($V = 0.165$; $p < 0.05$.) This suggests students with higher levels of undergraduate debt were more likely to major in fields not linked with higher average salaries. Figure 2 represents this relationship graphically.

Table 1: Correlation Between Total Expected undergraduate Debt and Likelihood of Choosing a Major with a Higher Average Salary

		Value	Approx. Sig.
Nominal by Nominal	Phi	0.165	0.048
	Cramer's V	0.165	0.048
N of Valid Cases		173	

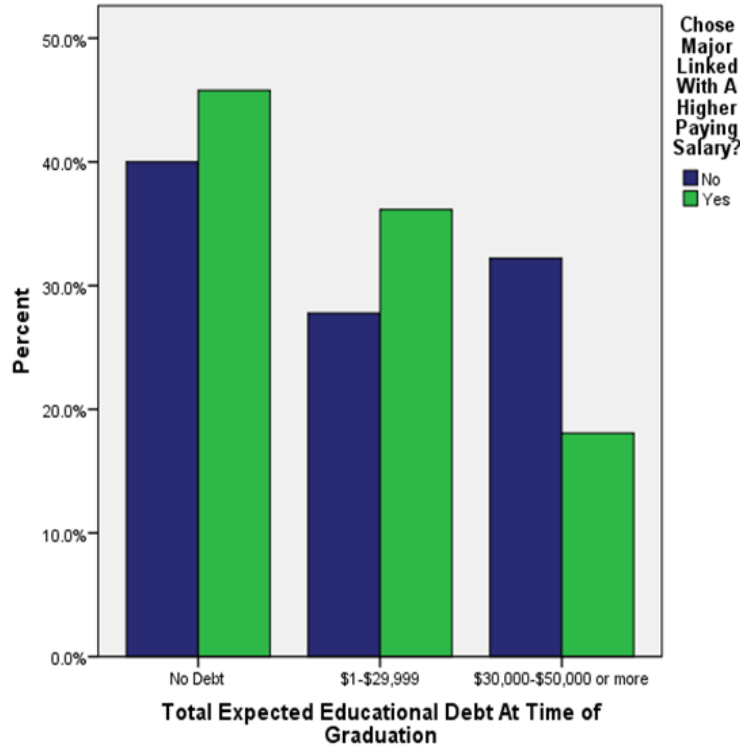


Figure 2: Total Expected Educational Debt at Time of Graduation and Choice of Major Linked with a Higher Paying Salary

Hypothesis 2: Students with lower levels of total expected undergraduate debt are more likely to plan on pursuing a postgraduate education program than those with lower levels of total expected undergraduate debt.

We ran a Chi-Squared test to analyze the relationship between students' expected levels of educational debt and their plans to pursue a postgraduate education program. The results shown in Table 2 reveal an insignificant relationship between the two variables ($p = 0.136$), and indicate that students with lower levels of undergraduate debt are no more likely to plan on pursuing a postgraduate education program than those with higher levels of undergraduate debt.

Table 2: Level of Independence between Total Expected Educational Debt Levels and Planning to Pursue a Postgraduate Education Program

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	1.241 ^a	2	0.264
Likelihood Ratio	1.419	2	0.264
Linear-by-Linear Association	0.105	1	0.373
N of Valid Cases	152		

Hypothesis Controls

Both hypotheses were controlled for college year (*freshman, sophomore, junior, senior*), gender, and race-ethnicity (*white, honorary white, minority*). Through Chi-Squared testing, we found no significant relationship between the independent variable and the control variables.

Additional Findings

We asked students the extent to which they considered eight factors when choosing their major. Their responses, shown in Table 3, showed that students strongly based their choice of major on their personal interest, natural talents, and connection to a job in their desired field of work. Students were less likely to base their decision on whether a major led to a direct career after college, or to a well-paying job. Furthermore, parental influence and ability to easily add a major were least likely to play a role in students' choice of major.

Table 3: Percentage Table of How Certain Factors Affect Students' Choice of Major

Factor Question	Strongly disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Slightly Disagree (%)	Slightly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree/Strongly agree combined %
It fits with my area(s) of personal interest	0.0	0.0	0.4	1.8	24.7	73.1	97.8
It fits with my natural talents	0.0	0.9	0.9	14.1	44.1	40.0	84.1
I could gain a major by just adding a few more courses	20.0	29.7	9.0	22.1	13.5	5.4	18.9
My parents wanted me to choose this major	26.5	30.9	17.9	20.2	4.0	0.4	4.4
I like the teaching styles of the professors in the department	1.4	3.6	9.0	36.5	35.6	14.0	49.6
It leads to a job in my desired field of work	0.4	3.1	3.1	17.0	30.0	46.2	76.2
It leads to a career right after college	9.9	16.1	17.9	29.6	13.0	13.5	26.5
It leads to a well-paying job, compared to many other majors	9.9	15.2	18.4	24.2	21.1	11.2	23.3

Discussion

Hypothesis 1

Our hypothesis was not supported. Statistical tests revealed the opposite relationship: students with higher levels of total expected undergraduate debt are *less* likely to major in a field with higher average salaries than those with lower levels of total expected undergraduate debt. This finding challenges prior research conducted by Baum and O'Malley who found that higher debt levels do not impact student's career decisions (2003). Furthermore, it also contradicts more recent studies which found that with increased levels of debt, students shifted from careers with lower average salaries to careers with higher average salaries (Rothstein, Rouse 2011). It is important to note that unlike our study, the others mentioned were longitudinal in nature and measured definite career choices rather than theoretical career choice based on students' choice of major. These differences are limitations of our study. They likely play a role

in the contradictory nature of our findings since students often choose careers that do not correspond with their major and change their career multiple times (Hiestand 1971).

Unlike previous studies, our research focused specifically on students attending a private, liberal arts college. Based on our measurement of what factors students found important when choosing a major, we speculate that liberal arts students may have different educational goals and future outlooks than students attending non-liberal arts colleges. Our data showed that students attending the private, liberal arts college valued choosing a major that fit their personal interests and natural talents rather than one that led to a higher paying job. Students attending the private, liberal arts college also reported they were willing to take on additional debt to follow their interests and engage in activities they found important, like study abroad. One survey participant commented, "I followed my passions and talents and majored in the things I cannot live without." These findings echo our focus group discussion, in which students reported that they were willing to take on debt to follow their interests and engage in activities they found important like study abroad.

Our study's findings are important for the college to consider. While being able to pursue one's passions and develop personal interests are important features of an undergraduate education, students should also be cognizant of their future financial situation when making academic and career decisions. To increase students' financial literacy, we recommend administration implement a one to two hour mandatory financial literacy seminar for the incoming freshman class. Furthermore, we suggest that administration implement a 0.25 credit personal finance course as a requirement for all students.

Hypothesis 2

Bivariate testing revealed no relationship between students' total expected undergraduate debt and plans to pursue postgraduate education. This finding is supported and

contradicted by prior research. Heller's findings, that debt has little to no impact on whether or not students attend graduate school, supports our findings (2001). However, the prior studies that found high levels of debt had negative impacts on students' decisions to attend graduate school contradict our findings (Millet 2003; Zhang 2010). The difference between our study's findings and these findings may derive from that fact that our study looked at students' "plans to pursue" rather than their definitive "pursuit" of postgraduate education. These are two related but different measures, students' plans to pursue a postgraduate education may or may not translate into actual pursuit of postgraduate education.

To further understand our findings, it is important to note that 95% of our sample planned to pursue some form of postgraduate education. This may indicate that students' expected debt levels do not challenge their future plans to further their education. This is supported by discussion from our focus group. One participant stated, "I'll consider debt, but I can't say it'll really make my decision for me. If there's something I want to do, I'll do it regardless of how much I owe." These results are important for the college to consider, because students may be underestimating the difficult financial instability associated with high debt levels. We recommend that administration have advisors discuss debt with students when examining their future plans. This would allow students to pursue future jobs and passions while being fiscally responsible.

Conclusion

Our research examined two hypotheses: whether students with higher levels of total expected undergraduate debt are more likely to major in fields with higher average salaries than students with lower levels of total expected undergraduate debt; and whether students with higher levels of total expected undergraduate debt are more likely to plan on pursuing a postgraduate education program than those with lower levels of total expected undergraduate student debt.

The results from our first hypothesis were not supported in that students with higher levels of total expected undergraduate debt are *less* likely to major in a field with higher average salaries than those with lower levels of total expected undergraduate debt. These results contradict prior research, but coincide with our focus group discussion, in which students reported they were more likely to follow their passions than base their academic career decisions on their expected debt levels.

The results from our second hypothesis were also not supported, since students with lower levels of total expected undergraduate debt were *no more likely* to plan on pursuing a postgraduate education than those with higher levels of total expected undergraduate debt. Prior research partially supported our findings, but our results fully coincided with our focus group discussion, from which we concluded that students are willing to accrue debt in order to further their education.

Our narrow sample size, skewed gender response rate, and sample population- students from a small, predominantly white, liberal arts college - limits our ability to generalize our findings beyond students of this college. Furthermore, the fact that our study measures students' "expected" total debt and "plans" to pursue a postgraduate education program rather than actual accumulated debt and pursuit of postgraduate education, makes our findings theoretical rather than definite. To more accurately investigate correlations between debt and postgraduate education enrollment, we recommend future researchers survey the alumni network and conduct a longitudinal study comparing students' postgraduate plans both prior to and after graduation. We encourage the college administration to increase student financial literacy by implementing a mandatory finance seminar for freshmen and ask advisors to discuss debt with their students in addition to future career plans.

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