



Planning, Choice and Change: Gendered Motivations in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

The gender composition of cohorts of university students has changed in recent decades. Informed by this broad social trend I sought to explore gender differences in higher education, such as whether women and men make decisions about pursuing higher education for different reasons, if so, what those reasons are and the gendered nature of choices in higher education. My research findings are based on data from a convenience sample of 60 undergraduate students representing a variety of majors and in-depth interviews with a different purposive sample of undergraduates. In this exploratory research, neither sample was random.

PURPOSE AND HYPOTHESIS

I hypothesized that men and women planned for their educational futures differently and that difference may be implicated in the changing trends in higher education. My working hypotheses were that women invested more time in planning for education, made choices based largely on personal interest, and were more likely to adhere stringently to plans than men. The guiding questions for this exploratory research were:

- When does planning begin/how much time is invested?
- What influences educational planning?
- What influences choice in the educational career?
- How firmly are plans, once made, adhered to?
- What reasons underlie changes in educational plans?

METHODS

Anonymous Questionnaires, 26 item survey

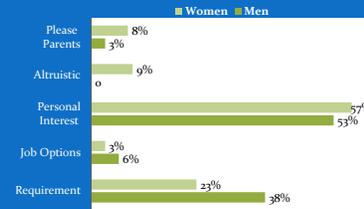
- 60 participants in two undergrad classes
- Convenience sample
- All advanced (junior/senior) undergraduates
- Descriptive statistics

In Depth Interviews

- 12 participants, all UB or former UB students
- Purposive sample
- Mix of junior/senior undergraduates, graduate students and recent graduates
- Analyzed using grounded theory techniques to identify categories and themes

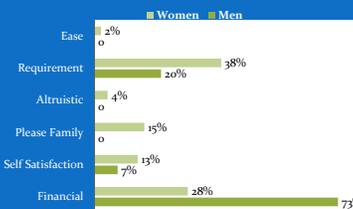
RESULTS

Planning Motivations



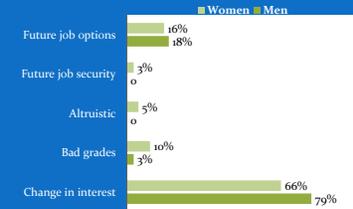
- **PLEASE PARENTS/FAMILY**
Desire to please family members by procuring a specific degree or following in their footsteps.
 - "My parents didn't make it seem like I had a choice."
- **ALTRUISM**
Desire to help others by obtaining qualifications that would allow them to do so.
 - "I always wanted to be a doctor so I could help people"
- **PERSONAL INTEREST**
Reflects the professed desire to get personal enjoyment out of one's educational career.
 - "I enjoy making short films."
- **JOB OPTIONS**
Desire to have choice and options in their career post college graduation.
 - "I can do anything with an English degree."
- **SPECIFIC CAREER NEEDS**
Pursuit of requirements as a foundation for specific career track.
 - "I need master's to be a physical therapist."

Why Choose Major?



- **EASE**
Wanting an easy to come by degree.
 - "An associate's was easy."
- **SELF SATISFACTION**
Aspirations, achievement for achievements' sake.
 - "I always wanted to be a doctor."
 - "I'll be the first in my family with a master's."
- **CAREER SUCCESS**
Pursuing a financially successful career.
 - "This is what I need to be successful."
 - "I want a good job."
- **ALTRUISM**
Qualifying to help others
 - "I wanna go into social work so I can help out."
- **PLEASE PARENTS/FAMILY**
Conforming with family members' desires
 - "Both of my parents are M.D.s."
- **SPECIFIC CAREER QUALIFICATIONS**
Pursuing a particular career path
 - "I want to teach in New York State so I need a Master's."

Why Change Major?



- **FUTURE JOB OPTIONS**
Desire for flexibility and choice in their future career.
 - "I want to have choice in the availability of jobs."
- **FUTURE JOB SECURITY**
Desirability to employers.
 - "I want qualifications that make me stand out."
- **BAD GRADES**
Previous academic mistakes.
 - "I wanted a clean start."
- **CHANGE IN INTERESTS**
Following new academic interest.
 - "I started as business and hated it."
- **ALTRUISM**
- **Want degree in "helping" professions.**
 - "I want credentials that will let me help people."

CONCLUSIONS

Results should be interpreted cautiously, since this is an exploratory study. There do appear to be several distinctively gendered patterns associated with undergraduates planning and choices.

- My data show that women who plan at all seem to plan longer than men
 - Other research demonstrates that further planning investment translates into higher commitment.
 - Women's further investment in planning gives them an upper hand in maintaining plans
- My data also demonstrate that planning for interest carries a deeper commitment than planning for occupation and can more easily translate between degree goals
 - Women are less likely to change majors in general and often carry majors between long term plans
- My data indicate that men more often choose financial success as motive for choice, which allows them to opt out as soon as a requirement for success has been met

Looking at the way that people are planning and choosing could allow for better understanding of causal relationships in education mapping and allow predictive patterns to be discovered.

Time Spent Planning

