

Business Boot Camp:
Helping Liberal Arts Students Acquire Preprofessional Skills

by

Michael Claudon
Professor, Economics
Middlebury College

and

Kathryn Frazer Winsted
Associate Professor, Marketing
Pace University

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MIDDLEBURY, VERMONT 05753

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Abstract

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Over the past decade, a fewer students have been majoring in liberal arts disciplines other than economics, while more of them have been choosing preprofessional undergraduate degrees (Godwyn 2009; Institute 2009; Paris 2007). Yet, ironically, CEOs and other employers have stated a preference for hiring candidates with a strong liberal arts background since it gives them transferable skills¹ fundamental to success in business (Gehlhaus 2007-08; LaHurd 2007). Nearly a quarter of Fortune 500 CEOs graduated with a BA in economics or other liberal arts discipline. (AP 2008).

Increasingly, however, students who do study in the liberal arts choose economics as their major, not because they are passionate about it, but because they feel doing so gives them an edge in the job market and more income in their first jobs. Yet being passionate about their majors, say experts, can give college graduates a significant advantage in the job market (Gehlhaus 2007-08).

A recent report from a symposium that examined the integration of professional and liberal education concludes that “although employers continue to emphasize the importance of a well-rounded education and (transferable) skill development, students also want access to more specific, job-oriented educational programs” (Paris 2007, p. 7)

Herein lies the dilemma facing liberal arts colleges and universities. Their faculties and often their administrations are loath to admit “preprofessional training courseware”, and particularly business education programs, into the curriculum in an attempt to protect the purity

¹ We interpret transferable skills as critical thinking, problem solving, effective communication, analyzing and interpreting information, forming and expressing informed opinions, appreciating the diversity and richness of human culture, and understanding human nature and society.

of the liberal arts. Yet the market – these faculties’ students and their parents – is voting with its feet. Economics departments are awash in a tsunami of students and their FTE counts are necessarily rising in an effort to accommodate them.

In addition to a growing number of business and economics majors, many students are choosing these fields as second majors and minors. Many are doing this, not because they are passionate about studying business or economics, but because “economics is practical,” and “studying economics is the only way I can get a good job when I graduate.”

One highly selective liberal arts college is experimenting with an approach to addressing this need with a concrete-skills-building boot camp for liberal arts majors that is run during the winter intercession. CORE, standing for Creativity, Opportunity, Risk and Entrepreneurship, helps students gain the experience, content skills, vocabulary and confidence they need to be more competitive in job markets. Among its goals is freeing students to focus on a major they are passionate about. Despite requiring upwards of 80-100 hours weekly, many more-than the usual winter offering, CORE has become one of the most popular courses on campus after just two years. And, as reported below, early evidence suggests that students who complete the program gain confidence to pursue their academic passions.

Pressure for Preprofessional Education

In 2009, the College Board Web site advising high school students about college majors reads: “If you major in the liberal arts, you’ll find that you have to create your own career path. If you feel that such opportunity and freedom is worth some uncertainty, you may have what it takes” (College Board 2009). In contrast, the site describes preprofessional majors as career-oriented and leading to a clear career. It is no wonder that, especially in times of economic

turmoil, a growing number of students are choosing preprofessional paths over the liberal arts. Between 1997 and 2007, business majors' share of the total college student population increased by 11.4%, while that for students majoring in traditional arts and sciences disciplines decreased by 4.3% (computed from statistics in Institute 2009). Business was the largest major in 2006-07 according to a Department of Education study (Institute 2009) and it remains the most popular college major in 2009 (Princeton Review 2009).

Godwyn (2009) states that “as increasing focus is placed on vocational education, liberal arts courses can seem anachronistic, even useless” (p. 2), and Hutton (2007) refers to the “perception of rigidity and irrelevancy in the liberal arts” (p. 1). Liberal arts programs today do not seem to be meeting the needs of current students. Grayson (2003) described the liberal arts as being “in crisis” and Godwyn (2009) suggests that “liberal arts programs must acknowledge the pressing pecuniary concerns that many students face... and articulate the economic utility of a liberal arts education” (p. 2)

A Liberal Education Provides Crucial Business Skills

CEOs and other business executives have long expressed an interest in hiring liberally educated managers (Harrison and Atkins 2000; Jones 1986; LaHurd 2007). The most important skills for managers are those traditionally emphasized in liberal arts programs, “the ability to analyze and synthesize information” (Atkins 1999), “abilities which facilitate and encourage inquiry and questioning on issues relevant to business and society” (Jackson 2009), and competencies in communication, teamwork, and time management for which liberal arts programs are noted (see Figure 1; also Gehlhaus 2007-08; Gosling and Mintzberg 2006). At the same time, many have stressed that traditional business programs are not teaching the behavioral

and critical thinking skills needed for successful business innovation and management (Bennis & O'Toole 2005; Ghoshal 2005; Maiden and Kerr 2006; Mintzberg 2004; Pfeffer & Fong 2002; Porter and McKibbin 1988).

According to a recent study covering skills business executives feel are important for business graduates (DETYA 2000), all but one, “comprehension of business processes,” can easily be provided by liberal arts programs. Many other studies have also indicated that skills sought by business executives fit well with liberal arts programs (Abraham and Karns 2009; Maes, Weldy, and Icenogle 1997; NACE 2007; Rubin and Dierdorff 2006 – see Figure 1). The question, then, is how to best give liberal arts students the additional career edge that preprofessional programs deliver.

Can Liberal Arts and Business Coexist Peacefully?

Ongoing philosophical and resource battles are being waged between the liberal arts faculty and preprofessional faculty in many universities. And many small liberal arts colleges seem determined to keep their programs “pure” by resisting any dilution from preprofessional courses. However, students benefit most if they can take advantage of both liberal arts and business education. “The application of knowledge deepens rather than diminishes liberal education” (Nesteruk 2008) and preprofessional programs are better off if they “prepare students for life as well as for rewarding careers” (Martinez, Padmanabhan, and Toyne 2007).

The literature is replete with work arguing for better integration of liberal and business education (e.g. Chew and McInnis-Bowers 2004; Rabuzzi 2001; Stark and Lowther 1988) and a symposium was held in 2007 specifically to address this issue (Paris 2007). In fact, the American Association of Colleges and Universities has argued that “there should be an end to

the traditional, artificial distinction between liberal and practical education” (AACU 2003). Many studies have also concluded that undergraduate business schools are not doing an adequate job of emphasizing the competencies most relevant to business (Abraham and Karns 2009; Langbert 2000; Pfeffer and Fong 2002; Rubin and Dierdorff 2007; Sadri 2002).

Some universities offer collections of courses designed to help students who not want to major or minor in business but who want to gain business knowledge (Hubert-Allen 2007). Doing so is not an option at small liberal arts colleges, where introducing preprofessional programs is resisted aggressively on both curricular and faculty resource competition grounds. A different model has potential to both break through faculty/intellectual purity resistance and resource constraints.

Involve me and I will Understand

“Tell me and I will forget. Show me and I may remember. Involve me and I will understand” (Native American proverb).

The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (the business school accrediting board) has stressed the importance of experiential education to help students make connections among the various functional areas of business (AACSB 2003). The Association of American Colleges and Universities also argues that it is important for students to learn to “interpret and evaluate information from a variety of sources” and “transform information into knowledge and knowledge into judgment and action (AACU 2003). Many authors have stressed the need to cross-disciplinary, experiential education. McKinney and Yoos (1998) argue that “artificially isolated, functionally oriented, teacher-centered courses tend to reinforce isolated, functionally oriented, passive thinking in students” (McKinney and Yoos 1998, p. 618) and

Jackson (2009) argues that business education needs to work to help students achieve a more “empirically grounded competency profile” based on industry needs (Jackson 2009; also Pfeffer and Fong 2002).

Many authors and employers have also stressed the importance of internships for helping students better understand potential jobs and the choices they have (Hubert-Allen 2007; LaHurd 2007). Internships also are very likely to lead directly to job offers for students.

The alternative model we are presenting in this paper is founded on the view that learning-by-doing while still in school offers a particularly powerful mechanism for gaining competencies sought by business employers (see Figure 1: Competencies Sought) (Colby 2007; Nesteruk 2008; Stephens 2007). To paraphrase Guy Kawasaki (2004), academics study business, while businesspeople do it. The model being introduced here is about doing it. Rather than the traditional passive learning model where students listen to highly educated experts in a field lecture and lead seminars based on their reading and research, the model proposed here takes learning out of the classroom and into the real world arena where risks are taken and decisions must be made, allowing learners to “make the knowledge with the assistance of an expert” (Ellet 2002, p. 7). Highly successful professionals directly expose students to the real world. (Crebert et al. 2004; Stephens 2007) Active replaces passive learning, mentors replace professors and students must get out of their seats and learn in collaborative, competitive and highly interactive environments and situations. Doing so directly involves them in their own learning, and it gives them “greater awareness of real-life issues to round out their theoretical knowledge” (Hogg 2004, p. 4).

Business Boot Camp

The model being presented here is being tested at a small liberal arts college. . In its experimental phase the **CORE** paradigm is being executed as an ultra-intensive four-week business and entrepreneurship preparatory program.² For most of the sessions, visiting business and non-profit leaders architect demanding coursework and weekly case competitions. Practical learning spans numerous functional roles in business and organizational theory, while fast-paced team-work and competitions train students in four primary areas: creativity, opportunity, risk and entrepreneurship (CORE) The course is designed to give students a strong foundation in the processes of organization, leadership, entrepreneurship, communication and risk management (see Figure 3). Its mantra, “Confidence for the road ahead,” speaks to its mission: giving students the confidence needed to study whatever they care about most, knowing that they will still be prepared for good careers after graduation

CORE’s vision statement is to “get students to re-think their approach to their education by re-thinking how we educate them”. All components of the course are designed to get students to think in a whole new way, to drive them outside their comfort zones and to involve them in every aspect of their learning so that they will understand (see Figure 2: Vision and Mission).

Almost nothing about this course resembles traditional liberal arts education. Successful business people, mostly alumni, teach short, interactive sessions to give students a better understanding of the different processes and careers in business. These same business people serve as mentors to the students, having lunch with small groups of students, serving as panelists at dinners with the students, and advising them as they work on their weekly projects. They

² While the initial experiment involves a business-focused application, the College’s goal is to scale the program across disciplines first, and later to build year-long sequences around the CORE paradigm. An early example is a separate CORE course that focuses on general sciences.

teach, advise, critique, and share their own personal experiences and career paths. All guest mentors are asked to teach students interactively and to draw from three dimensions for course options providing concepts, skills, and knowledge (see Figure 3: Course Options)

For four weeks, students spend at least five hours daily in class learning basic business and organizational skills, including a great deal of writing and public speaking. They listen to and participate in presentations and exercises covering a wide range of topics, lunch with their mentors, and compete in weekly team challenges. Twice each week the class meets for dinners featuring panels discussing selected themes, followed by questions and more casual conversation (see Figure 4: Sample Week 1 Schedule).

Students are actively engaged in every facet of the course. They are challenged by exercises requiring creativity and problem-solving, they need to make decisions and solve problems using teamwork, they need to create and deliver presentations with very limited time and information, and they learn how to make and learn from mistakes. In addition, the students are networking throughout the course with their classmates and with five to ten new mentors brought in each week (see Figure 6: Guiding Principles and Figure 7: Teaching Techniques).

In addition to the CORE sessions, students who complete the course are offered winter and summer internships with mentor companies. These internships are offered exclusively to CORE graduates. Almost half of the 2008 course graduates took advantage of this opportunity. (Recruiting internships was rendered nearly impossible in 2009, given the severe economic conditions. However all of those that were offered were filled.)

Weekly Competitions

Each of the four weeks of the course open with and are anchored by a real business or social challenge led by entrepreneurs, professionals or public officials (for a list of challenges from the first two years, see Figure 5: Competitive Challenges). After the challenge is introduced on Monday morning, the student teams, mentored by the challenge leaders during frequent office hours and over lunch, engage in cold calling, do traditional research, and meet regularly. Each week's challenge culminates on Friday when, supported by a PowerPoint deck, each team pitches its resolution and recommendations, while the week's mentor group judges the presentations. The winning team enjoys a free dinner at the local restaurant of its choosing. And in 2008, but not repeated in 2009 due to recession-driven funding constraints, winning teams were also invited to donate \$1000 of CORE funds to their favorite charities.

There is intentional variety in the challenges given to students. In the first two weeks, teams are given traditional business problems like analyzing and offering strategy recommendations to a startup venture, determining a target market for a product, or proposing marketing solutions. Teams deal with challenges in social entrepreneurship and civic engagement during the third week. CORE closes in week 4 when teams are given one week to conceive and develop as fully a fleshed-out startup plan as they can for an entirely new for-profit or social enterprise. Examples of civic projects that have been developed by groups in CORE include food waste reduction in the college dining hall, reduction of paper waste in campus printers, and streamlining campus debate in order to promote civic engagement.

Student teams are chosen randomly every week, which introduces sometimes jarring realism as it also teaches critical collaboration and compromise skills and approaches to achieving results in a team environment. These are skills that are not often emphasized in traditional liberal arts classes. That the entire program emphasizes teaming and collaboration over individual work

also translates into growing kinship within the group that creates a wonderful sense of community and leads to new friendships, all of which last well beyond the end of the course.

Connecting with Alumni

Each year, nearly 30 business instructor-mentors are brought in for some portion of the four-week CORE course. These mentors teach sessions, meet individually with students over lunch and dinner, and guide students in their case competition efforts. Mentors also are urged to offer internships during the winter intercession and in the summer.

Most of the instructor-mentors are college alumni seeking ways to re-connect with the college. This opportunity has generated tremendous enthusiasm among the alumni who have participated and is a terrific way to bring these alumni back into active engagement with the college. Alumni who have participated have been very impressed with the college and with the students' capabilities and dedication, and nearly all have expressed interest in participating in this and other programs again. This mentor-student relationship is highly rewarding for student and mentor alike, helping now and later with college alumni development efforts.

Assessment

By all measures, CORE was a huge success in its first two years of operation. 95 percent of students gave CORE a 5 on a 1-5 scale when asked for an overall rating of the course and 100 percent said they would recommend the course to a friend. Additionally, 100 percent of students said the course helped them reach the goals they set for themselves at the beginning, and 100 percent said that the course changed their ideas about what life would be like after college. All students also felt the course should become a regular offering during the January term. Most

also said that CORE gave them new ideas for a career path, and affected their ideas about a major and/or extracurricular activities while in college.

Nearly all students gave the highest possible rating to the weekly case competitions and the team presentations, and nearly all agreed completely with statements saying they felt more confident as communicators and as collaborators, and that they understood organizations and the operation of enterprises better. Every major component of the program was rated above 4 on a 5 point scale by students, and nearly every goal of the program achieved a rating above 3 on a 4 point scale (see Figure 8: Course Evaluation for more detail).

Below are just a few of the comments made by students when asked to comment on the CORE course:

“This is the first college course I’ve taken that requires teamwork, time management and public speaking every single day of class. This will be really helpful for the rest of college and after I graduate.”

“CORE has been one of the best, if not the best, learning experience I’ve ever had.”

“I gave up my entire life for the month...but it was worth it.”

“CORE was a mind-blowing experience; totally transformational.”

“I strongly believe that students heading for the business world need this kind of experience before graduating.”

“Having alumni come back and teach sessions gave wonderful perspective and provided proof that you don’t have to be an econ major to go into business.”

“This course is a new and innovative way of teaching students to think, which is, in the end, why we go to a liberal arts school.”

The last quote gets to the core of why this course is such a perfect fit in a liberal arts school, enhancing, rather than detracting from, the liberal arts curriculum. This course could be launched successfully at nearly any small liberal arts college or university, either during an official winter term, if one exists, during the January or May intersessions, or, alternatively, during a summer session. The course, as presented here, would probably be too intense to teach

during a regular semester, though certainly a less-intense variation of the course could be offered during the Fall or Spring semester.

Figure 1 – Competencies Sought by Business Employers

<i>DETYA 2000</i>	<i>NACE 2007</i>	<i>Maes, Weldy, Icenogle 1997</i>	<i>Abraham & Karns 2009</i>
Academic achievement	Communication skills	Oral communication	Communication skills
Time management skills	Strong work ethic	Problem solving	Customer focus
Written communication skills	Teamwork skills	Self-motivation	Team worker
Oral communication skills	Initiative		Interpersonal skills
Interpersonal skills	Interpersonal skills		Dependable
Problem solving skills	Problem solving abilities		Problem solver
Comprehension of business processes	Analytical abilities		Results oriented
			Leadership skills
			Flexible/adaptable

Figure 2 – CORE Vision and Mission

<p>Vision: Get students to re-think their approach to their education by re-thinking how we educate them.</p>
<p>Mission: Enrich the liberal arts, empower students to pursue their intellectual and academic passions and prepare them for success in their personal and professional lives; and re-engage college alumni, parents and friends, by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engaging executive, entrepreneur and innovator mentors to create an intensely interactive and rich learning experience; and • Driving students out of their comfort zones as they <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Acquire skills and experience using creativity, opportunity identification, risk-taking, and entrepreneurship; ○ Engage in problem-solving and decision making at levels far beyond any previous experience; and ○ Sharpen their analytical, presentation and writing skills in collaborative and competitive settings.

Figure 3 – Course Content Options

Concepts	Skills	Knowledge
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Accounting/ Finance ▪ Civic Engagement ▪ Creating/ Building Initiatives ▪ Ethics ▪ Externalities ▪ Globalization ▪ Human Resources ▪ Information Technology ▪ Leadership ▪ Legal ▪ Marketing and Advertising ▪ Merger and Acquisitions ▪ Operations ▪ Organization Structure ▪ Policy and Governance ▪ Sales ▪ Social Responsibility ▪ Strategy and Planning ▪ Supply Chain 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Advocating ▪ Accounting/Finance ▪ Collaborating/Teaming ▪ Conflict Resolution ▪ Creativity and Innovation ▪ Critical Thinking ▪ Cultural Sensitivity ▪ Entrepreneurship ▪ Evaluating/Exploiting Opportunity ▪ Goal Setting: Personal/Organization ▪ Interviewing ▪ Leadership ▪ Negotiation ▪ Networking ▪ Numeracy/Qualitative Analysis ▪ Priority Setting ▪ Risk Management ▪ Selling ▪ Strategy Formation/ Implementation • Time Management ▪ Transitioning From College ▪ Writing/Speaking/ Presenting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Advertising and Marketing ▪ Banking and Finance ▪ B2B/B2C ▪ Communications ▪ Consumer Packaged Goods ▪ Consulting ▪ Education ▪ Entertainment ▪ Government/NGO/Politics ▪ Healthcare ▪ Hospitality/Event Creation/Mgt ▪ Insurance ▪ Manufacturing/Services ▪ Private Equity and VC ▪ Retail ▪ Small Business ▪ Social Organizations ▪ Tax and Audit Politics

Figure 4 – Sample Week 1 Schedule

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
9:00-9:50	9:30-10:50	9:00-10:15	10:00-12:15	9:30-11:45
Introduction to CORE NYT Tower Challenge	Myers-Briggs Interest and Strong results	Sales Exercise	You be the editor – writing exercise	Week 1 competition – team presentations
10:00-12:15	11:00-12:15	10:30-12:15		11:45-12:15
Week 1 competition: Founder, True Soap	Intro to accounting and finance	Weekly competition office hours – 20 min per team		Jury deliberating
12:30-1:15	12:30-1:15	12:30-1:15	12:30-1:15	12:30-1:15
Voluntary lunch with mentors – sign up	Voluntary lunch with mentors – sign up	Voluntary lunch with mentors – sign up	Voluntary lunch with mentors – sign up	Presentation/resolution critiques and awarding of week’s prize
1:30-5:30	1:30-4:30	1:30-3:00	1:30-4:30	1:30-6:30
Teams do cold calling to collect primary data	Leadership/problem solving/collaboration exercises	Marketing basics – Mars case	Communication (voice, body, language, presence) exercises	Week 2 competition: Fire, Fury and Noise: Building a Propane Accumulator
		3:15-4:30		
		Accounting and Finance – what company would you buy?		
6:30-8:30	6:30-8:30	6:30-8:30	7:30-9:00	
Teams meet and work	Kick-off dinner – panel on the day’s takeaways	Dinner – panel on commercial philanthropy	Teams meet and work	

Figure 5 – CORE Entrepreneurial Challenges

2008	2009
Week 1 – Flatware Recovery System – Entrepreneurial Opportunity	Week 1 – True Soap - Entrepreneurial Opportunity
Week 2 – Beck’s Prime steak house restaurants –SWOT analysis and growth opportunities	Week 2 – Marketing Communication: Copper NP
Week 3 - Generating Commitment: An Engaged Citizen Public	Week 3 - International conflict resolution – Who’s Jerusalem is it?
Week 4 – Create a Venture – Business or Social Organization	Week 4 – Create a Venture – Business or Social Organization

Figure 6 – CORE Guiding Principles

- Create a learning experience that includes:
 - Experiential, interactive and collaborative activities
 - Group dynamics
 - Individual/personal challenges
 - Learning from mistakes
 - Being driven from comfort zones
 - Physical activity and contacts outside of the classroom
- Generate more questions and dialog than answers
- Teach more than content; teach tools and processes
- Teach the value of knowing what you don't know
- Define the possible and enable the impossible
- Facilitate greater confidence & problem solving skills
- Be transformational for students
- Enable the creation of a lasting network of mentors, contacts and friends
- Work hard during the week, but provide time to recharge over the weekend
- Attract students from across all academic disciplines, not just economics
- Deliver to mentors a transformational experience and allow them to engage or re-engage meaningfully with the College

Figure 7 – CORE Teaching Techniques

- **Content delivery sessions** – classroom based setting delivering content on business concepts, skills and industry knowledge through Powerpoint or some other type of prepared delivery mechanism. Best when session employs a dialogue with the students.
- **Challenge exercises** – A brief concept introduction that tees up the challenge(s) for the session, followed by problem solving session, either as a group of the whole or in 3-person teams. Team recommendations, if sought, are then delivered in 3 – 5 minute presentations, followed by general discussion.
- **Extended challenge exercises** – A 15 minute concept introduction followed by an initial 20 minute problem solving session in 3-person teams. Teams complete exercises, research, etc overnight. Their resolutions and recommendations are then delivered in 5 – 10 minute presentations, followed by general discussion.
- **Weekly competition** – A week long problem solving exercise that requires planning, discovery, analysis, recommendations and classroom presentation.
- **Dinner panel discussions** – A setting to explore any idea, topic, industry, career etc. in a casual panel discussion.
- **Mentor lunches** – The opportunity for mentors to get to know students and explore any question or issue.
- **Group and individual role-playing/relationship-building sessions** – The opportunity for students and mentors to “play” together; everything from formal sessions led by athletic, acting, speaking coaches to informal pick-up sports, hiking, and just hanging out.
- **Public Speaking** – Individual students deliver original 5 – 10 minute talks, either supported or not supported by visual aids

Figure 8 – Course Evaluation

	2008			2009		
	Average			Average		
Overall rating of course – 5 is highest						
Overall, how would you rate the course?	5.0			4.9		
Contribution to Learning – 5 is highest						
Weekly case competitions	4.9			4.8		
Team presentations	4.8			4.7		
Skills/topics sessions	4.2			4.4		
Theme dinners	4.4			4.3		
Mentor lunches	4.3			4.3		
Self-assessment	4.3			4.3		
Accomplishment of program goals – 4 is highest						
Feel more confident as a communicator	3.8			3.9		
Feel more confident in collaborating	3.5			3.8		
Feel more confident in networking	3.4			3.6		
Inspired to launch an original idea or business	3.5			3.6		
Understand enterprises better	3.8			3.4		
Understand better how to use management skills for change	3.6			3.3		
Feel more confident assessing and managing risk	3.0			2.9		
General questions	Yes	No	Not sure	Yes	No	Not sure
Did this course help you reach your goals?	100 %			100 %		
Should this become a regular offering?	100 %			100 %		
Would you recommend CORE to your friends?	100 %			100 %		
Did this course change your ideas about what life will be like after college?	100 %			91 %	9 %	
Will this course affect your choice of non-academic activities?	82 %		18 %	70 %	10 %	20 %
Did you discover new career paths or reject old?	82 %	18 %		67 %	25 %	8 %
Will this course affect your choice of major?	27 %	55 %	18 %	45 %	10 %	45 %

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