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BUSINESS GRADUATES SHOW LEAST INTEREST IN THEIR WORK, POLL FINDS

By Douglas Belkin
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Business is the most popular course of undergraduate study at U.S. colleges and universities. It is also the one most likely to produce people bored with their jobs.

Those are findings from a survey of 30,000 graduates of all ages conducted by Gallup with Purdue University that compared four large categories of majors: business; social sciences and education; sciences and engineering; and arts and humanities. It found business students are the least engaged in their work and, in a twist, not even the most economically secure. That honor falls to science and engineering graduates.

"My advice to Americans, especially young people, is that if you make a decision about what to major in based on how much money you want to make, you might end up disappointed, not only with your first job but with your overall career," said Brandon Busteed, executive director of Gallup Education.

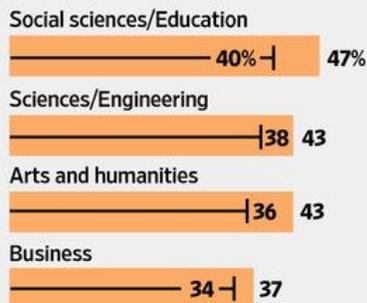
The poll, conducted in February and March, is part of a growing effort to tease out the value of different aspects of a college education. The poll didn't measure graduates' precise earnings, though it did ask whether they felt financially secure. Instead, it asked questions to measure how engaged graduates are in their work, how connected they feel to their communities and whether they enjoy a sense of purpose in their lives.

Desk Drones

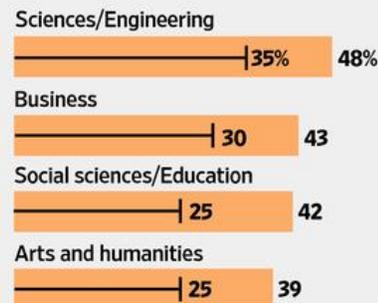
Among four broad courses of study, business graduates are the least engaged in their work—and in a twist, not even the most financially secure, a Gallup-Purdue survey found.

All college graduates
↑
2000-14 graduates

Respondents deeply interested in the work that they do



Respondents thriving financially



Source: Gallup-Purdue Web survey of 29,560 college graduates conducted Feb. 4-March 7; full sample margin of error: ±0.9 pct. points

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The poll has revealed that graduates from elite schools fare no better than their state-school peers; that teachers and mentors matter a great deal; that members of fraternities and sororities are generally happier than their non-Greek peers; and that significant student debt can weigh down graduates even decades after they leave school.

Just 39% of college graduates feel engaged at work — meaning, for instance, that they enjoy what they do on a daily basis and are emotionally and intellectually connected to their jobs. Only 11% reported they were “thriving” in five different aspects of their lives, among them financial stability, a strong social network and a sense of purpose.

The poll didn’t take into account which career path graduates followed or why they chose their majors, so it isn’t clear how much of the results are due to causation and how much to correlation.

When presented with the statement, “I am strongly interested in the work I do,” 37% of business majors agreed, trailing the other categories by at least six points. Of those who studied the social sciences or education, 47% said they were strongly interested in their work, leading the pack. The gaps were slightly smaller among students who have graduated since 2000.

Social sciences and education majors also came out on top when asked whether they had a sense of purpose to their lives and a sense of well-being, with 56% saying yes. Business majors again brought up the rear, at 48%.

Science and engineering majors reported the most financial security, with 48% saying they are financially “thriving.” Of business majors, 43% said the same, followed by 42% of social science and education majors and 39% of arts and humanities majors.

Numbers for recent graduates in all majors are sharply lower, with just 25% of arts and humanities graduates since 2010 reporting a sense of financial security. Among college graduates ages 22 to 27, about half are either unemployed or working in a job that doesn’t require a college degree, according to the New York Federal Reserve.

One possible explanation for the general job dissatisfaction among business majors may be linked to the low number who had internships applicable to their studies while in college—a practice that correlates strongly with job satisfaction later in life. One in three science graduates had an internship tied to their major, but just one in four business majors did.

“Business programs might be teaching textbook business but falling down when it comes to real applied learning experiences,” Mr. Busted said.

Students who go on to graduate school generally report higher degrees of life satisfaction, but even among this group, business majors trailed the pack when asked about a sense of purpose and well-being, with just 56% reporting they were “thriving” as opposed to other majors who were all at either 62% or 63%.