

EDUCATION: COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES

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Degrees of success in a tough economy

More college students
are crunching numbers
before choosing a major

BY ADAM STONE | CONTRIBUTOR

Having witnessed half a decade of recession, today's college students are thinking less about liberal arts and more about fields more likely to provide a job.

"When you hear about your older brothers and sisters graduating with huge debt loads, and they can't pay them off because they can't get the right kind of job, you start to think about what you want to be doing," said Bradley R. Byrne, former chancellor of the Alabama Department of Postsecondary Higher Education, past chief executive officer of Alabama's two-year college system and now a partner with law firm Jones Walker LLP.

"The economy is driving their choices more and more," Byrne said.

At the University of Alabama at Birmingham, where the hottest undergraduate majors track closely to the fastest-growing sectors of the economy, health care dominates the list of fields such as biology, nursing and psychology – all in the nation's top six majors. Business programs follow closely with accounting ranking high.

Rising federal regulation is similarly giving rise to the

need for professionals who can wade through government requirements.

Education also makes the list of hottest majors, not just on the undergraduate level, but also among higher-degree seekers. Many of them are pursuing degrees in special education, as well as educational leadership, which are also two fast-growing career areas.

This rising demand "has a very strong influence," said Bryan Noe, dean of the UAB's graduate school. "If you spend a lot of money (or) if you are paying out of your own pocket, one would hope that the end result is a job."

Noe also pointed out in relation to medical majors that "there are always going to be jobs in that area. As the population ages, there will be more and more people who are going to need health care."

UAB's hot majors generally track those observed nationwide.

When CNN teamed with CareerBuilder.com, their survey of the most popular college majors identified biology, business administration, communications and computer science among the leaders.

The U.S. Department of Education reported as of 2009–2010 (latest data available) top majors included business, social sciences and history,

health professions and education.

Princeton Review's survey also singles out business administration, psychology, nursing and biology as its leaders.

It's clear the hottest of the hot majors generally overlap, regardless of who is conducting the survey.

At the same time, each of these leading indicators comes up with a slightly different order in describing the most sought educational tracks.

There are some reasons that may explain the divergence.

One of them is time. The Education Department survey, in particular, was done early in the recession and this could have skewed results. Another has to do with poll sampling.

Also, different schools vary in strengths, so the sample may have influenced the results. This is possibly the case at UAB, with its strong academic leaning toward medicine. This expertise likely drives a higher-than-average enrollment in health sciences, especially when students perceive a coming bump in demand for these skills.

Another potential driver, according to Byrne, is health care reform.

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It "is going to cause more money to go into the health care industry," he said. "When you put that together with an aging population, we are going to see a growing number of people in the health care professions and para-professions. That area is just going to grow."

A Payscale.com analysis indicates the money could grow too.

Biomedical engineers can earn an average starting salary of \$53,800, projected to grow

82 percent to \$97,800 by mid-career. These stats may be helping drive students toward certain career paths.

But Byrne advised, for students to thrive in these hot majors and earn larger salaries, "the educational system as a whole may need to make adjustments."

As he pointed out, majors such as engineering, biology and health sciences – all share one thing in common.

"Those areas all require a fairly high level of mathematics and science," Byrne said. "So we have to start focusing more on high school and middle school – on how we are preparing students in those areas."

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