

PROFESSIONAL SELLING:
A STUDY OF ECU COLLEGE OF BUSINESS STUDENTS

A Senior Honors Project Presented to the

Honors College

East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for

Graduation with Honors

by

Andrew William Lee

Greenville, NC

December 2019

Approved by:

William Jason Rowe

Department of Marketing and Supply Management

Table of Contents

Abstract.....3

Introduction.....4

Opening.....4

Literature Review.....4

Closing.....5

Methods.....6

Overview.....6

Participants.....6

Procedure.....7

Limitations.....10

Results.....11

Discussion.....20

References.....22

Additional Documents

IRB Approval

PowerPoint Presentation

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to understand East Carolina University College of Business students' perceptions of sales as a career and to learn these students' awareness and interest in the ECU Professional Selling Certificate. ECU's College of Business offers a Professional Selling Certificate to students of any major. I hypothesized that many ECU students may not be aware of this certificate. My purpose in this project is to learn about student opinions of sales as a career and the Professional Selling Certificate offered by ECU. The questions that guided my project include "Are ECU College of Business students aware of the Professional Selling Certificate?" and "Are these students interested in pursuing sales as a career?" In order to answer these questions, I surveyed over 400 ECU College of Business students on their awareness of the Professional Selling Certificate (PSC, from here) and their perceptions of sales as a career. The results show that just over half of students surveyed (54.8%) are aware of the PSC. Just under half of students surveyed (45%) have an interest in pursuing sales as a long-term career, while many more would be willing to begin their career in sales regardless of long-term plans (56.9%). Conclusions drawn from this research include that ECU College of Business students believe that their programs prepare them for a career in sales. Marketing majors specifically show greater interest in sales careers than other majors, followed by management majors.

Introduction

Opening

The Professional Selling Certificate at ECU is an additional educational path available to students of all majors. The courses required for the PSC focus on skills that will benefit students who are seeking careers in business-to-business sales. It can be added to a student's degree plan by speaking with an advisor and adding its five required courses to the student's degree plan. The certificate can be especially beneficial to students in the College of Business, as these students are already required to take some of the classes that are required for the certificate, and many students in the College of Business are interested in sales as a career. Additionally, the PSC is a very useful resource for students at ECU because many entry-level jobs are sales related. A few factors also studied were students' interest in sales as a long-term career, students' willingness to work in sales initially, and whether they thought sales skills would be useful in any career.

Literature Review

In this article, I will present research that is already available, as well as build on it with my own information. A 2011 study showed that students' perceptions of sales as a career influences their interest in pursuing sales (Karakaya et al., 2011). This work also explains that students believe salespeople are intelligent and have a good understanding of customer needs (Karakaya et al., 2011). This study also confirmed a positive association between whether students had taken classes in sales and their perceptions of sales as a career (Karakaya et al., 2011). Another research study published in 2013 determined that students' interest in sales greatly influences their choice to pursue a sales education (Kumar and Kumar, 2013). Next,

consistent with my research, a 2014 study revealed that males are more likely to pursue a career than females and that changes in attitude can occur if sales is presented to students in a realistic way (Allen et al., 2014). In a 2009 study, it was found that negative implications of sales careers did not dissuade MBA students from seeking a career in sales (Pettijohn & Pettijohn, 2009). The same study found that most MBA students would accept a job in sales if given the opportunity (Pettijohn & Pettijohn, 2009). Additionally, a study in 1993 found that as GPA increased, students' interest in sales decreased (Swenson et al., 1993).

Closing

The aforementioned research in addition to the information available on ECU's Professional Selling Certificate raised a few questions to fuel my research: "Are ECU College of Business students aware of the Professional Selling Certificate?" and "Are these students interested in pursuing sales as a career?" I also wanted to learn what factors may lead to students' interest in sales, and interest in sales education. The survey research below attempted to fulfill answers to these questions.

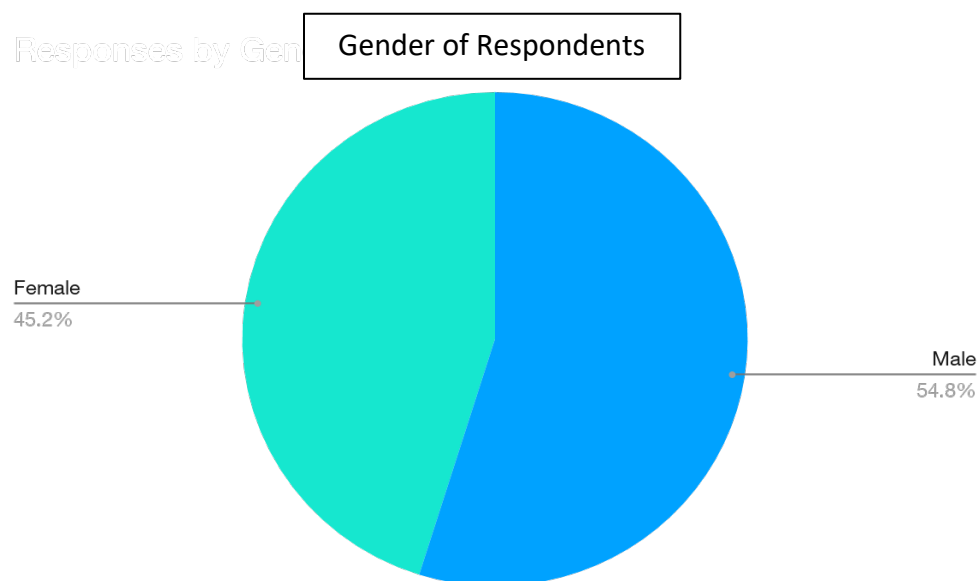
Methods

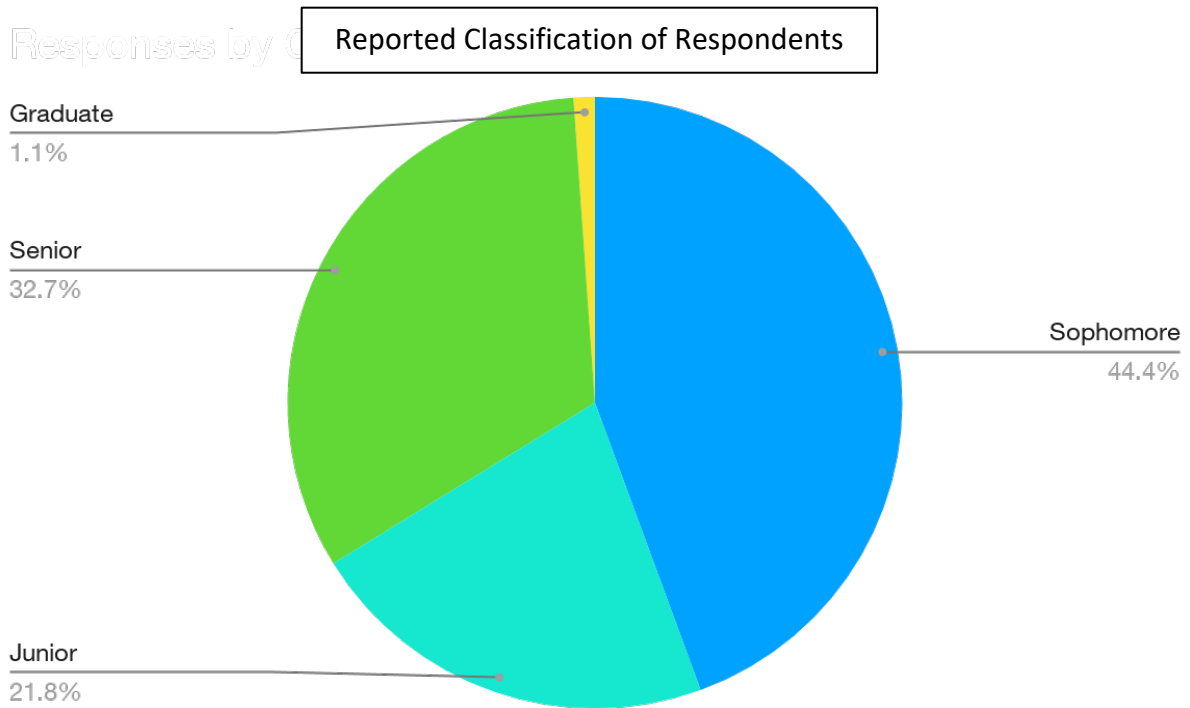
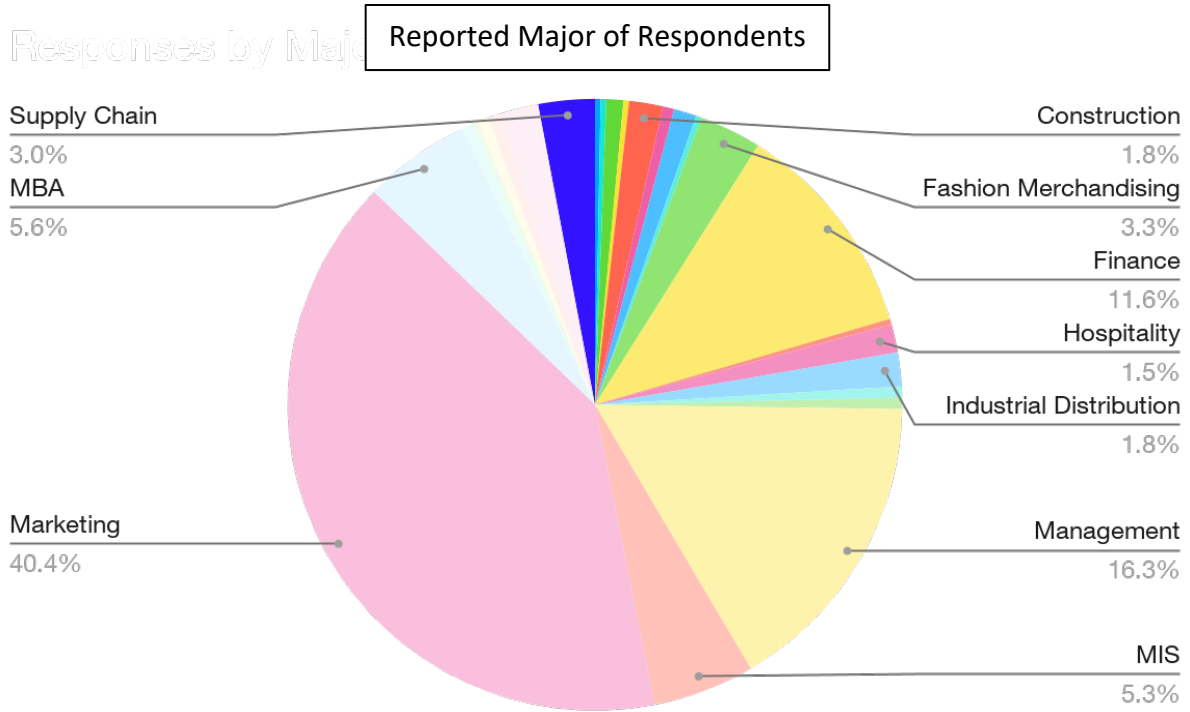
Overview

For this study, a sample of ECU College of Business students was surveyed to learn criteria regarding awareness of the PSC and their perceptions of sales as a career. Select professors helped to distribute the survey to their students, reaching an audience of around 500 students. 424 total responses were collected, and 378 legitimate responses were included in the final analysis.

Participants

Of the 424 total responses, 378 responses were recorded for analysis. The gap of 46 unanalyzed responses includes incompletes, nonresponses, and survey tests from administrators. Screening criteria included ECU student status and business student status. Participants were only eligible to participate in the survey if they were students in the ECU College of Business. Participant demographics by gender, classification, and major are visualized in the following figures:





Procedure

Five ECU College of Business professors administered the survey by asking students in their classes to participate. Some professors offered incentives to students for participation. The survey was hosted on Qualtrics and contained 13 items excluding demographic questions.

The first section using a five-point Likert scale is shown in the figure below:

Please rate the following statements based on whether you agree or disagree.

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neutral	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
I have an interest in pursuing sales as a career.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Regardless of my long-term career goals, I would be willing to work in sales initially.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I believe it's common for a new graduate's first job to be sales-related.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Even if I never work in a sales role, I believe developing selling skills will help me in my career.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The program in my major or concentration does a good job of preparing me for a position in sales.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

The remaining content questions using nominal scales are listed below:

1. Have you heard about ECU's Professional Selling Certificate before today?
 - Yes
 - No

NOTE: Selecting "No" skips participant to question 6

2. Where did you hear about it the Professional Selling Certificate?
 - Professor

- Academic Advisor
 - Other _____
3. Do you view the Professional Selling Certificate as a valuable addition to your education?
- Yes
 - No
 - I am not familiar with the certificate.
4. Have you signed up for the Professional Selling Certificate with your advisor?
- Yes
 - No
5. If you have heard about the Professional Selling Certificate but have not signed up for the Certificate with your advisor, would you be interested in pursuing it?
- Yes
 - No
 - I have not heard of the Professional Selling Certificate before today.
 - I have already signed up for the Professional Selling Certificate.
6. If you have not previously heard of the Professional Selling Certificate, would you like to learn more?
- Yes
 - No
7. How would you describe most entry-level jobs in business?
- Sales

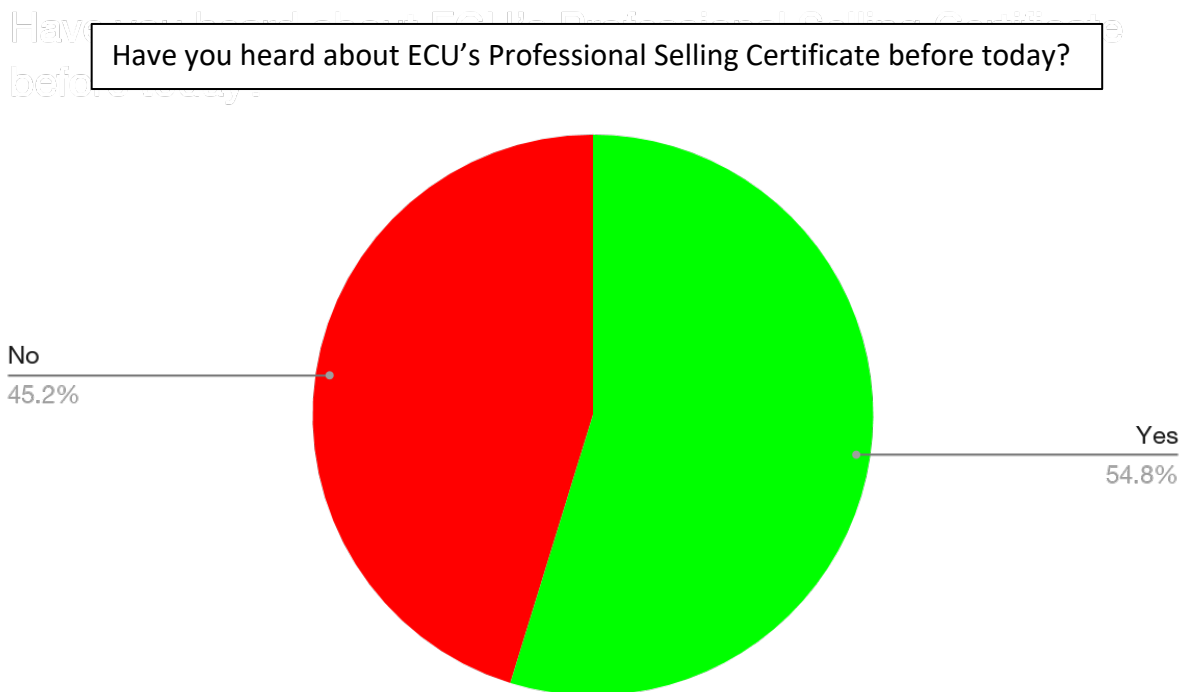
- Non-sales
- I don't know

Limitations

This study is limited because it only researches a specific group of students at East Carolina University. Additionally, due to the collection method, only specific classes with professors who were willing to assist in data collection were studied. This could potentially exclude useful data from classes that were not involved in the study. Additionally, it is possible that the class types that were studied could act as a confounding variable because many responses came from select classes.

Results

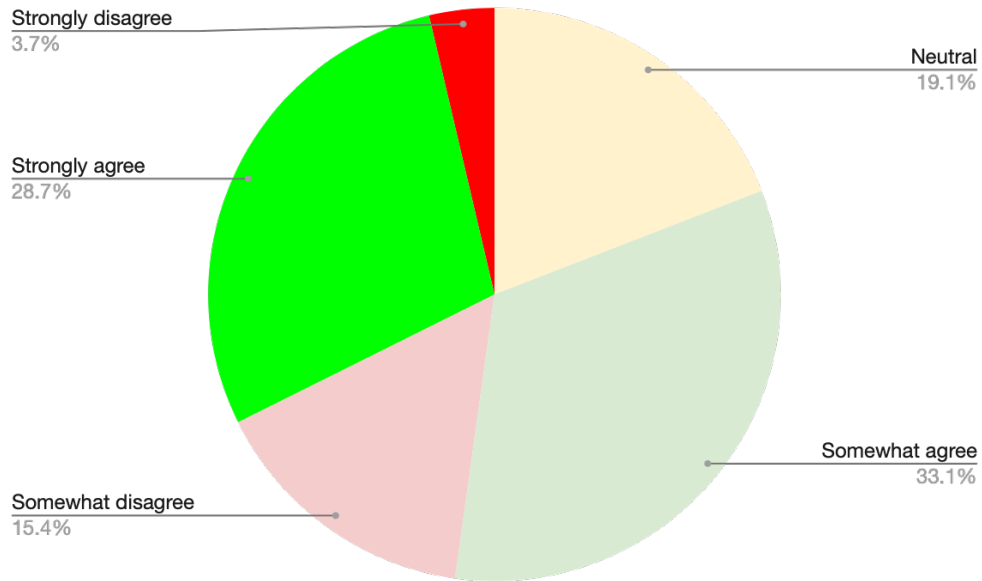
The two questions that guided my research include “Are ECU College of Business students aware of the Professional Selling Certificate?” and “Are ECU College of Business students interested in pursuing sales as a career?” As shown in the figure below, just over half of students surveyed were aware of the Professional Selling Certificate.



The second research question is answered by the responses to two survey items from the Likert scale:

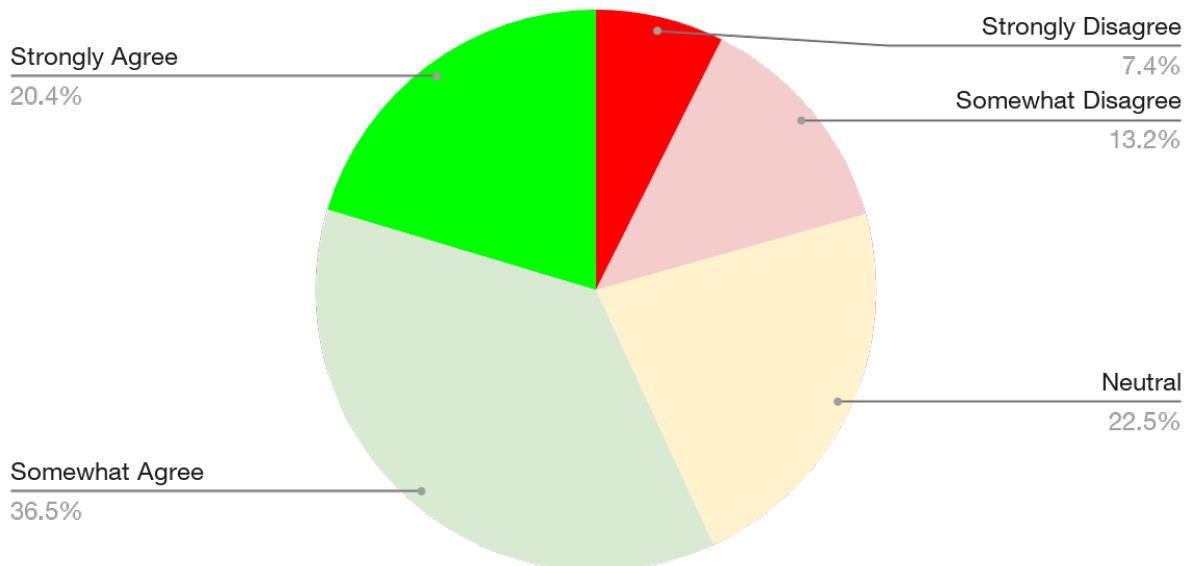
- I have an interest in pursuing sales as a career.
- Regardless of my long-term plans, I would be willing to work in sales initially.

I have an interest in pursuing sales as a career.



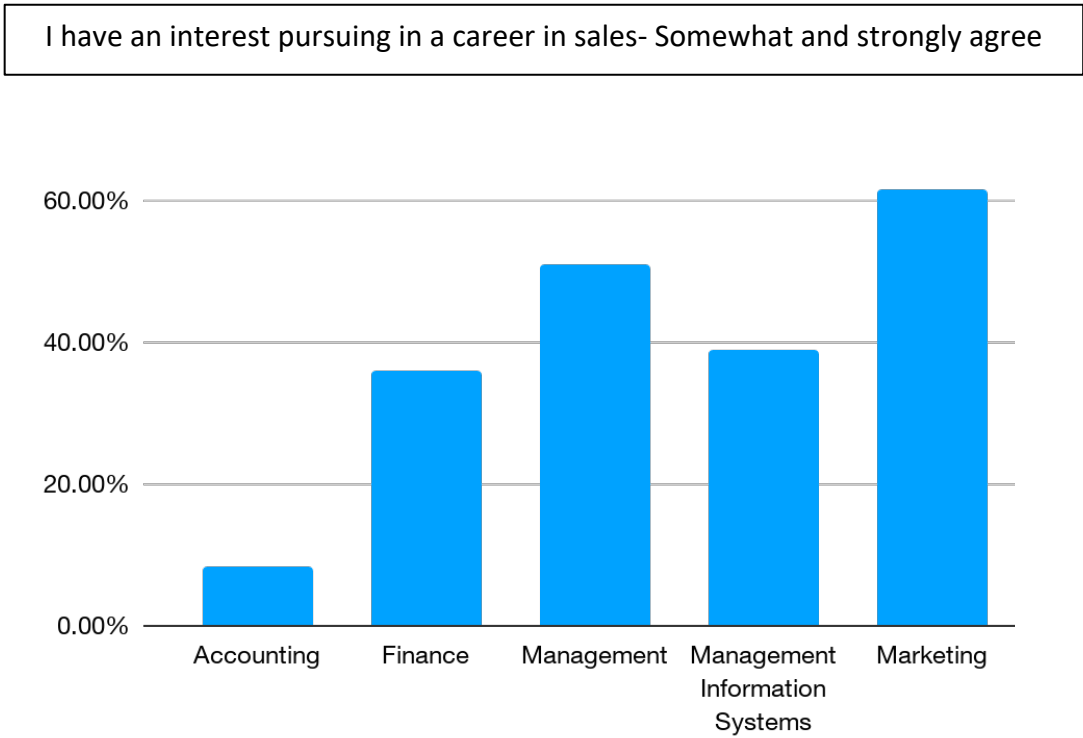
As demonstrated in the above figure, around 62% of students surveyed have an interest in pursuing sales as a career.

Regardless of my long-term plans, I would be willing to work in sales initially.



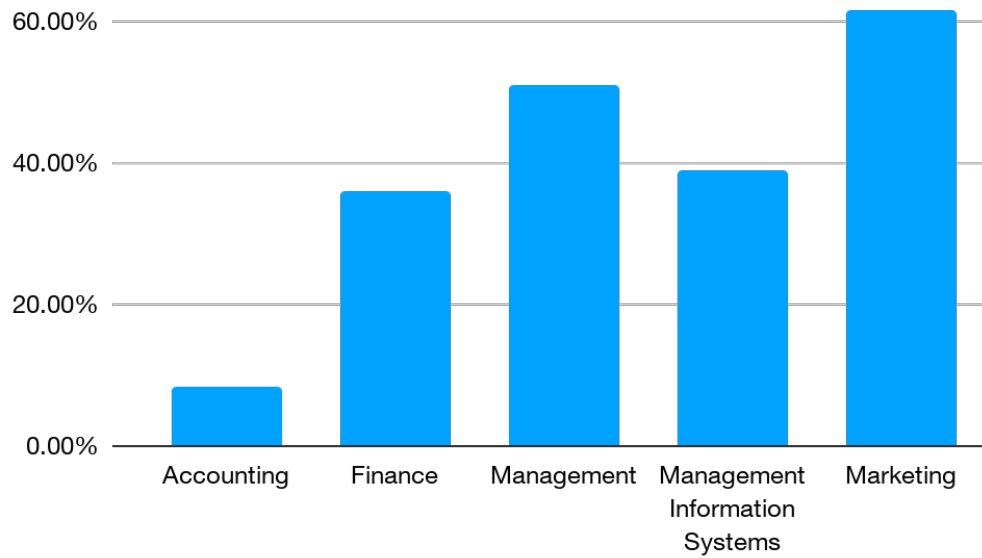
The above figure visualizes that about 57% of students agree at some capacity that they would be willing to begin in a sales career, regardless of their long-term plans. Now that the research questions have been answered, below is other information gathered from the survey regarding students' interest in sales.

This research also revealed that marketing majors are more likely to have an interest in sales careers than other majors surveyed, followed by management majors. See figure below:



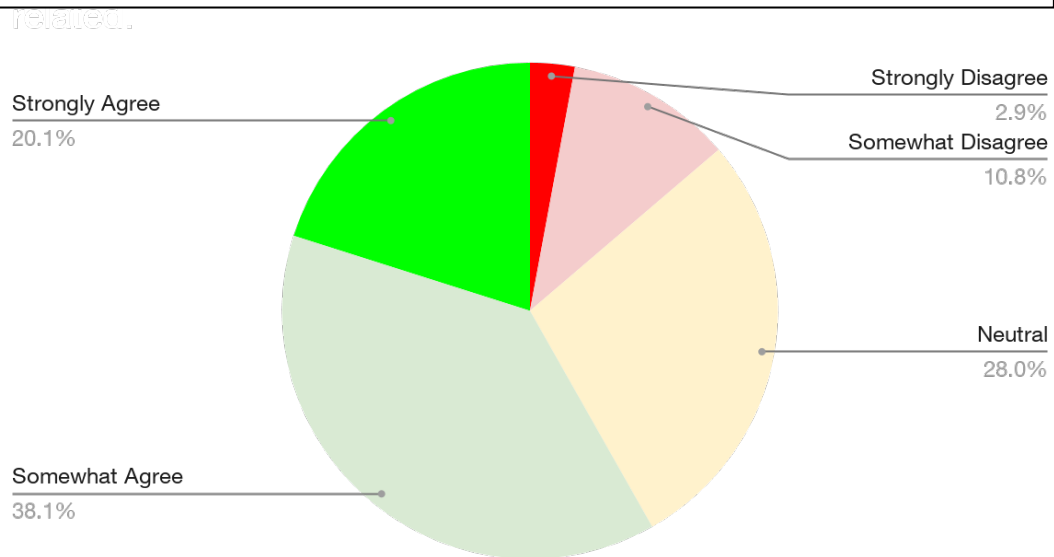
In a parallel to students' interest in sales as a career broken down by major, marketing and management majors believe at the highest rate that their programs do a good job of teaching valuable sales skills:

My major or concentration does a good job of teaching sales skills.



Respondents overwhelmingly believe that sales jobs are common first jobs for graduating students. Over 58% of respondents responded positively to this item. See figure below:

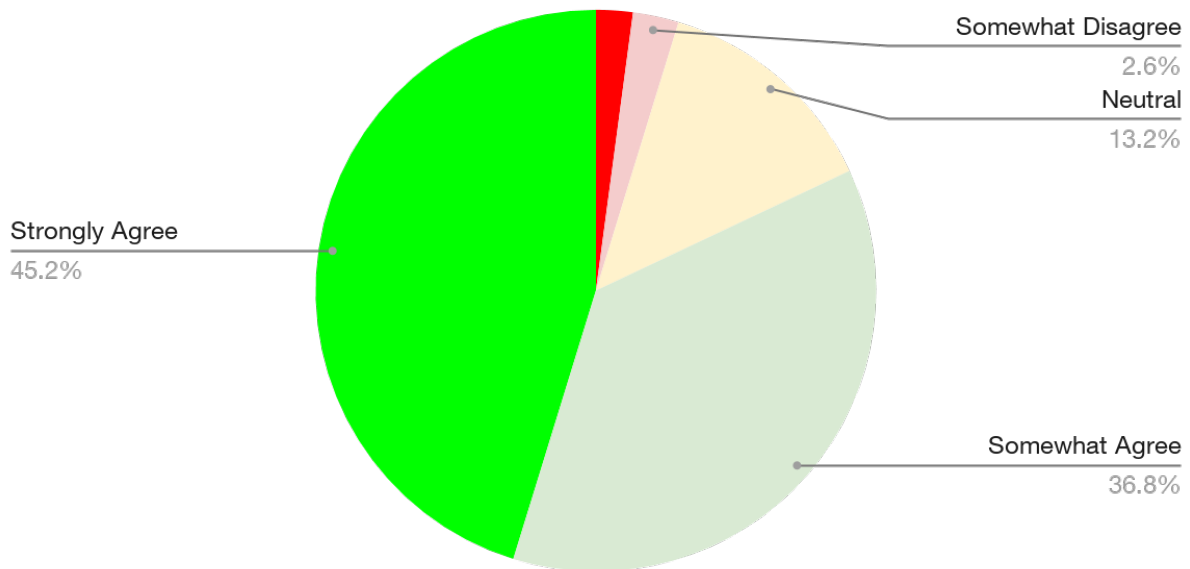
I believe it's common for a new graduate's first job to be sales related.



An even greater majority believe at some capacity that sales skills are beneficial in any career:

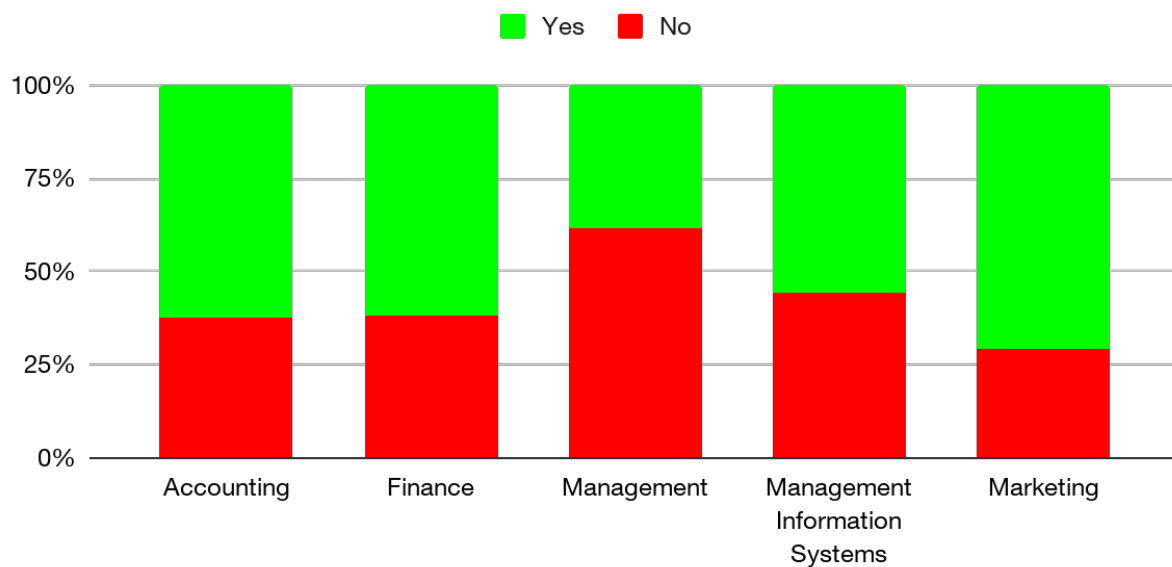
Even if I never work in a sales role, I believe developing sales skills will help me in my career.

Even if I never work in a sales role, I believe developing sales skills will help me in my career.



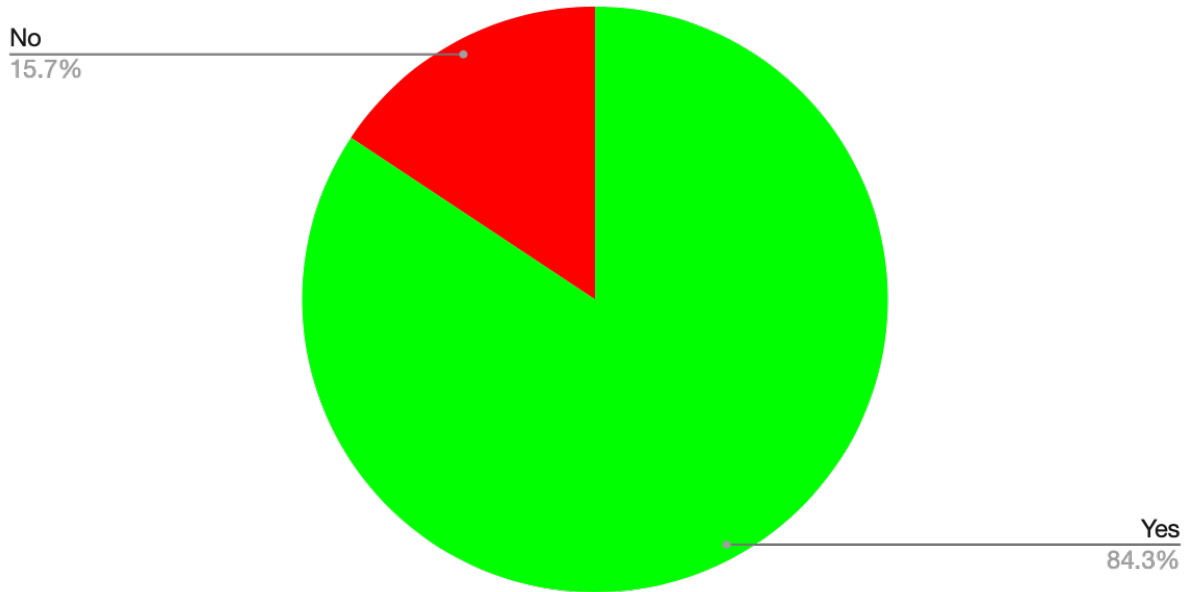
Next, there are many interesting data points regarding East Carolina University's Professional Selling Certificate. First, marketing majors were mostly aware of the certificate, while management majors had the lowest awareness. See the figure below:

100% Have you heard about ECU's Professional Selling Certificate before today?

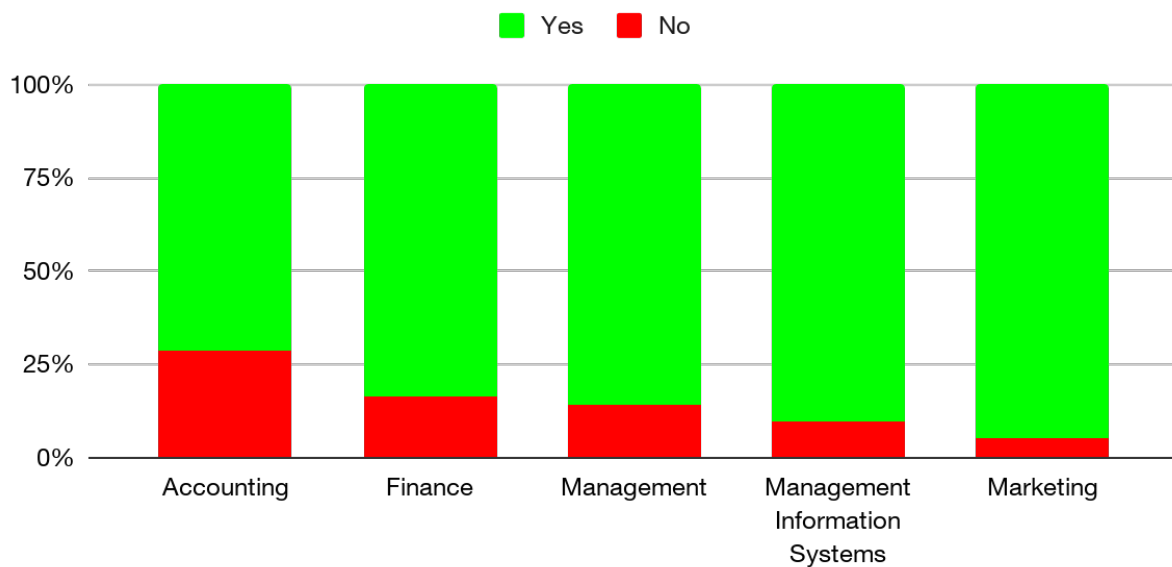


An overwhelming majority of students who are aware of the certificate believe that it would be a valuable addition to their education. Additionally, nearly all marketing majors who have heard of the PSC view it as valuable:

Do you view the Professional Selling Certificate as a valuable addition to your education?



Do you view the Professional Selling Certificate as a valuable addition to your education?



Even given that the vast majority of aware students view the certificate as valuable, only around one quarter of them have signed up for the certificate with their advisor:

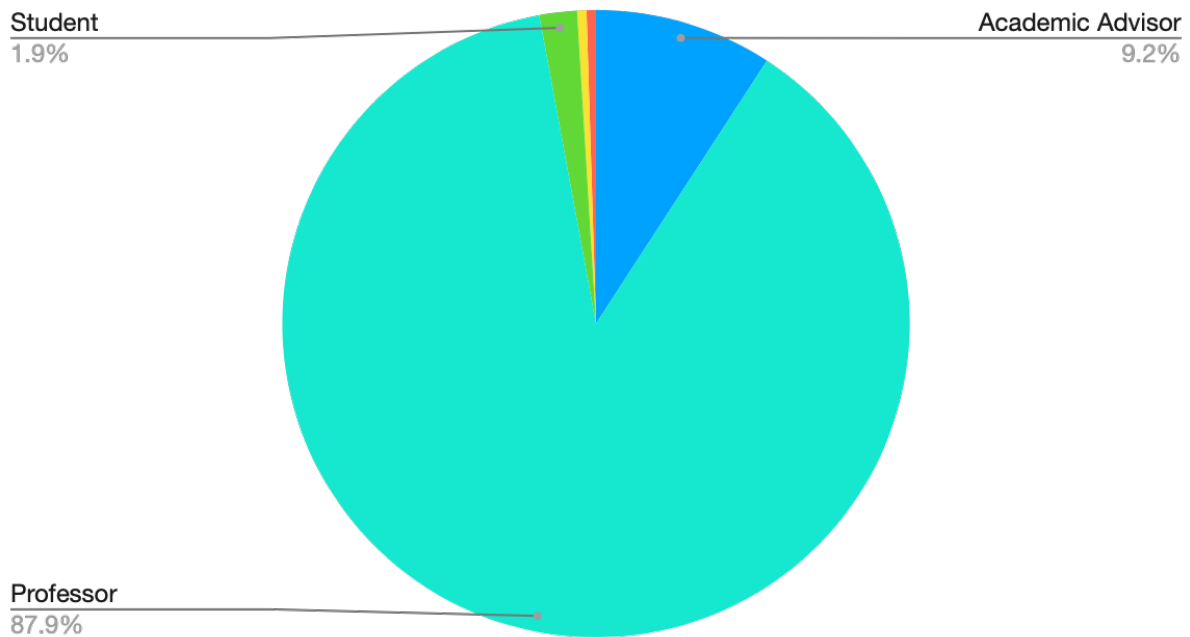


With this data broken down by major, it becomes abundantly clear that this type of sales education is most popular with marketing majors:

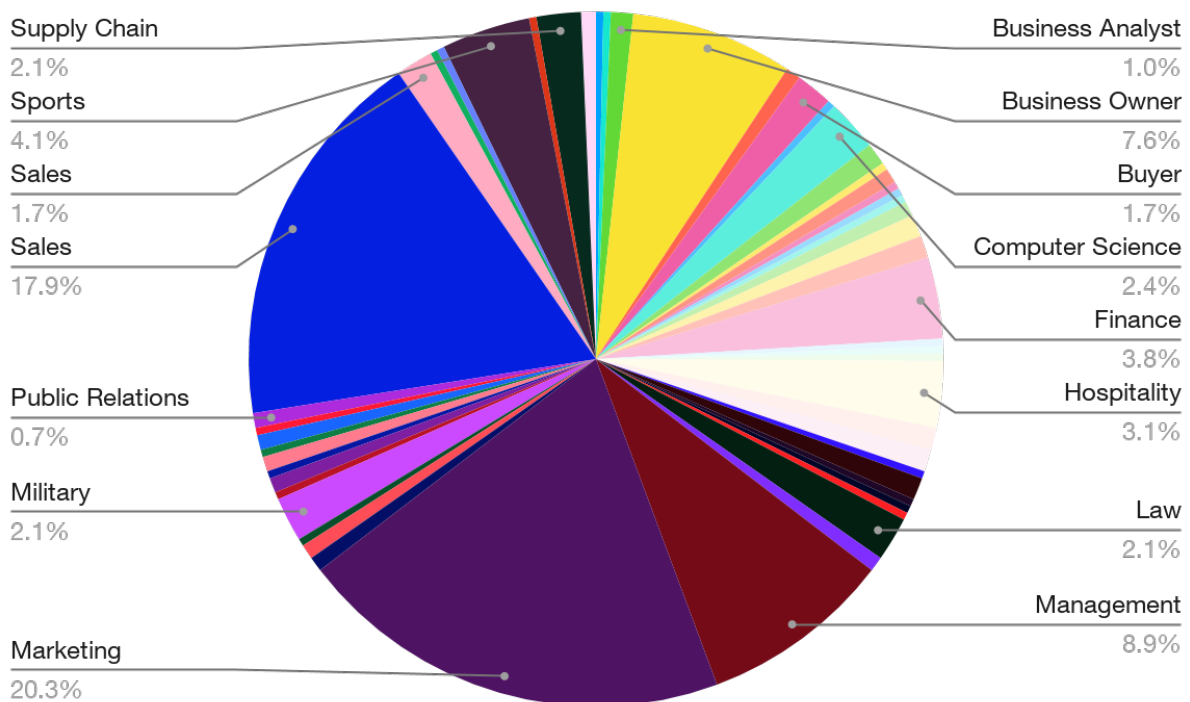
Aware students were also asked where they heard of the PSC. More students were made aware of the certificate by professors than any other messaging method:

Where did you hear about the certificate?

Where did you hear about the Professional Selling Certificate?



Finally, participants were asked about their general career interests. The most popular responses were sales, and marketing, followed by management, business owner, and finance:



To summarize the key research question takeaways from this survey, just over half of ECU College of Business students are aware of the professional selling certificate. The majority

of ECU College of Business Students have an interest in pursuing sales as a career. Marketing majors are much more likely to be interested in sales as a career than students of other majors. While 84% of students who are aware of the PSC view it as valuable, only 24% of these students are enrolled in the certificate. Professors have been the greatest at making students aware of the certificate, while academic advisors fall short in comparison. Finally, participants showed a variety of career interests with the most popular responses being sales, marketing, and management.

Discussion

As discussed in the literature review, students who have had a sales education are more likely to have an interest in and pursue a career in sales (Karakaya et al., 2011). East Carolina University has an option for students to receive a sales education through the Professional Selling Certificate, though only a quarter of students surveyed had enrolled in the certificate. This low enrollment rate could be connected with external factors. For example, only a small portion of students heard of the certificate through their academic advisors, which could implicate that advisors are not pushing the certificate as a value-add to a student's business education. Only a slim majority of students are aware of the certificate, though this number could be much greater. This could be improved if advisors pushed the certificate's value to students. Even though only a quarter of students have signed up for the certificate, an incredible majority (84%) percent of aware students view the certificate as a valuable addition to their education. There is room for more research to discover the disconnect from 84% of aware students stating that it is valuable compared to only 24% of students enrolled in the PSC. Apart from the certificate, this study also revealed information regarding students' perceptions of sales as a career.

Consistent with a previous research study, this sample demonstrated a correlation between interest in sales and willingness to pursue sales as a career (Karakaya et al., 2011). It was found that marketing majors were consistently more interested and willing to work in sales than students of other business concentrations studied. Management majors were second most interested and willing to work in sales, though management majors were least aware of the PSC. This could be a result of either these students' interests that led to their major

decision OR their education within their majors influencing their interests. Due to the narrow scope of this study, there are limitations and opportunities for additional research.

Because this study only included College of Business students at ECU, results could differ between institutions. Additionally, students who participated in this study were only enrolled in classes from select professors who helped to administer the survey. These class types could be a confounding variable when associated with overall responses. As a result, conclusions can only be drawn for these students and not an overall population of business students. Further research opportunities could utilize a totally random sample on a larger scale (because a random sample will likely produce a lower response rate). This sample could include enough students from each business concentration to draw reasonable conclusions from all concentrations, not just the top-responding majors in this study.

Overall, this study answered the questions that it was designed to answer. Are ECU College of business students aware of the Professional Selling Certificate? The results were mixed with just over half of students being aware of the PSC. Are ECU College of Business students interested in pursuing sales as a career? Results suggest yes, over 60% of students surveyed are interested in pursuing a career in sales.

References

- Allen, C., Kumar, P., Tarasi, C., & Wilson, H. (2014). Selling Sales: Factors Influencing Undergraduate Business Students' Decision to Pursue Sales Education. *Journal of Marketing Education, 36*(2), 94–104. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0273475314537279>
- Karakaya, F., Quigley, C., & Bingham, F. (2011). A Cross-National Investigation of Student Intentions to Pursue a Sales Career. *Journal of Marketing Education, 33*(1), 18–27. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0273475310389151>
- Kumar, Anil & Kumar, Poonam. (2013). An Examination of Factors Influencing Students Selection of Business Majors Using TRA Framework. *Decision Sciences The Journal of Innovative Education*.
- Pettijohn, C. E., & Pettijohn, L. S. (2009). AN EXPLORATORY ANALYSIS OF SALES CAREER DESIRABILITY: AN MBA PERSPECTIVE. *Academy of Educational Leadership Journal, 13*(4), 35-47. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com.jproxy.lib.ecu.edu/docview/214230763?accountid=10639>
- Swenson, Michael & Swinyard, William & Langrehr, Frederick & Smith, Scott. (1993). The Appeal of Personal Selling as a Career: A Decade Later. *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management, 13*. 51-64. 10.1080/08853134.1993.10753936.