



Scholarly Open Access Repository  
at University of Southern Indiana

## **Decline in Foreign Language Majors: A Case Study at a Small, Private, Midwestern University**

Authors	Crowe, Lucinda
Download date	12/08/2022 13:51:12
Link to Item	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12419/741">http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12419/741</a>

**Decline in Foreign Language Majors:  
A Case Study at a Small, Private, Midwestern University**

A dissertation presented to  
the Graduate Faculty of  
the University of Southern Indiana

In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

Lucinda J. Crowe

May 2022

This dissertation titled  
**Decline in Foreign Language Majors:  
A Case Study at a Small, Private, Midwestern University**

by

Lucinda J. Crowe

has been approved by

Bonnie Beach, Ph.D.

Committee Chair

Tori L. Colson, Ed.D.

Committee Member

George Iber, Ph.D.

Committee Member

Tori L. Colson, Ed.D.

Director of Graduate Programs in Education

Michael Dixon, Ph.D.

Director of Graduate Studies

## Table of Contents

Table of Contents	i
List of Tables	iv
Abstract	v
Dedication	vii
Acknowledgments	viii
Chapter 1: A Problem of Practice	1
Statement of the Problem	4
Purpose of the Study	6
Research Questions	7
Significance of the Study	7
Definition of Terms	8
Summary	11
Chapter 2: A Review of the Literature	13
Overview of Foreign Language Study	13
Theoretical Framework	15
Themes Influencing Major Choice	16
The Influence of Economic Outcomes in the History of American Education	17
The Function of Interpersonal Relationships on the Choice of College Major	21
The Impact of Intrinsic Interest or Motivation in Selecting a College Major	24
The Role of College Curriculum and Pedagogy in Determining Choice of Major	27
Summary	30
Chapter 3: Methodology	33
Purpose	33
Research Questions	33
Research Design	34
Description of Research Site	34
Participants	35
Ethical Recruitment of Participants	36
Reflexivity and Positionality	37
Data Collection	39
Data Analysis	44
Validity	48
Assumptions	52
Limitations	54

Delimitations	54
Summary	55
Chapter 4: Findings	56
Descriptive Findings	57
Sample Size	57
Participant Characteristics	58
Foreign Language Majors	58
Students Majoring in Fields other than Foreign Language	60
Data Analysis Procedures	63
Results	65
Responses to Interview Question 1	65
Response to Interview Sub-question a.	67
Responses to Interview Sub-question b.	67
Response to Interview Sub-question c.	68
Responses to Interview Sub-question d.	69
Response to Interview Sub-question e.	71
Response to Interview Sub-question f.	74
Responses to Interview Question 2	78
Responses to Interview Question 3	83
Interdisciplinary Collaboration with a Focus on Careers.	84
Opportunities for Conversation.	85
Community-based Learning.	87
Departmental Outreach.	87
Responses to Interview Question 4	88
Summary	89
Chapter 5: Conclusions	92
Discussion of the Findings	93
Research Question 1	93
Research Question 2	96
Research Question 3	98
Research Question 4	104
Interdisciplinary Collaboration with a Focus on Careers.	104
Opportunities for Conversation.	105
Community-based Learning.	105
Departmental Outreach.	106

Findings in Relation to the Literature	106
Findings Consistent with the Reviewed Literature	107
Findings Not Consistent with the Reviewed Literature	108
New Findings	110
Summary of Findings Compared to Reviewed Literature	111
Limitations of Findings Compared to Reviewed Literature	112
Implications of the Findings for Practice	112
Recommendations for Further Research	119
Conclusion	121
References	124
Appendix A: Semi-structured Interview Script	138
Appendix B: Interview Questions	140

**List of Tables**

Table 1 <i>Research Questions and Corresponding Interview Questions</i>	46
Table 2 <i>Emerging Categories Influential in Major Choice with Representative Quotes</i>	66
Table 3 <i>Number of Participants Reporting Each Factor as Influential in Major Choice</i>	77
Table 4 <i>Influential Factors in Major Choice from Least Cited to Most Cited</i>	78
Table 5 <i>Likely Career Paths Reported by 10 Foreign Language Majors and 10 Majors in Other Fields</i>	81
Table 6 <i>Numbers of Selected Career Paths Stemming from a Desire to Help Others</i>	83
Table 7 <i>Comparing Key Factors Identified by Foreign Language Majors and Majors in Other Fields</i>	101

## Abstract

CROWE, LUCINDA J., Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership, May 2022.

Decline in Foreign Language Majors: A Case Study at a Small, Private, Midwestern University

Chair of Dissertation Committee: Bonnie Beach, Ph.D.

Even though a great deal of research exists that speaks to the individual and societal advantages of foreign language learning, enrollment in world language courses at universities across the United States continues to plummet. The research site for this case study is no exception to this phenomenon. To understand the decline in foreign language majors, it is necessary to understand how and why students choose their majors. Although studies on variables influencing choice of major abound, a gap exists in relating the influence of these variables to the choice of foreign language per se as a major.

In this case study a qualitative approach was employed to identify the factors that influence students' choice of major and to explore initiatives that might strengthen the foreign language program at this small, private university. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 participants who had chosen foreign language majors and 10 elementary-level foreign language students who had chosen majors other than foreign language. An analysis of the data from these two groups answered the overarching questions of the study: What factors influence students to choose a foreign language major? What factors influence students to choose majors other than a foreign language? Are there differences and similarities in the factors influencing major choice identified by students majoring in a foreign language and those not majoring in a foreign language? What initiatives do students suggest as ways to strengthen the foreign language program? Triangulation of data, pilot testing, peer review, member checking, an audit trail, and reflexivity augmented the study's validity and trustworthiness. The findings revealed little difference and great similarity in the factors identified as influential in degree choice among students majoring in a foreign language and those majoring in other fields. In ascending order of



frequency, the most influential variables cited include middle and high school programs, K-12 teachers, economic considerations, and intrinsic interest or passion for the subject matter. The suggestions offered by the participants to strengthen the foreign language program centered on interdisciplinary collaboration with a focus on careers, departmental outreach to feeder schools, and curricular and pedagogical approaches with an emphasis on conversation and community-based learning.

## Dedication

*With God all things are possible*

*I dedicate this dissertation to the Lord and to my family with whom He has blessed me. To my mother whose love for language and history I inherited, and to my father who sacrificed so that I could be a first-generation college student. To my children and grandchildren each of whom I cherish and all of whom are uniquely diverse and amazingly gifted. And to my husband, my precious gift from God and the personification of "love never faileth," with whom one day I will be reunited.*

## Acknowledgments

This dissertation would not have been possible without the encouragement, guidance, and support of many people. First, I want to thank my committee members, Dr. Tori Colson and Dr. George Iber, for their assistance and feedback throughout the process. In particular, I want to express my profound gratitude to Dr. Bonnie Beach, my advisor and committee chair. Had it not been for her sincerity, genuine kindness, and approachability on the day we first met, I would not have begun this venture. She went above and beyond the call of duty to mentor and work with me every step of the way throughout my journey. I would not have accomplished this goal were it not for Dr. Beach.

I also want to extend my thanks to Dr. Kelly Sparks whose calming presence during my pilgrimage into statistical literacy and whose repeated “You got this!” quip gave me confidence and literally got me through all things quantitative. Additionally, I would like to thank author and professor Dr. Paul Theobald for his support throughout this adventure and for his thought-provoking classes that enlightened me regarding the philosophical and historical relationships between economics, politics, and schooling and the importance of community-based education. Of course, I wish to thank all my professors for inspiring me not just through their knowledge and love of their subject matter but through their passion and commitment to education as an endeavor focused on a growth mindset extending beyond the boundaries of academia in pursuit of social equity, global interconnectedness, and the betterment of humankind.

On a more personal note, I want to extend my appreciation to the members of my cohort who contributed in diverse ways to my successful completion of this degree and who continually astounded me with their talent. A special thanks goes to cohort member Becca Neel, Assistant Director for Resource Management & User Experience, who graciously helped me with things of a technological nature! I am also grateful to my colleagues associated with the research site whose friendship is immeasurable and whose companionship represented a constant source of

reassurance throughout this undertaking. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to my immediate family, as well as my cousins, for their understanding and encouragement and for always lending an ear. Your love was a blessing that provided moral support throughout this exhausting yet rewarding odyssey.

## Chapter 1: A Problem of Practice

“Nothing less is at issue than the nation’s security” (Perkins, 1979, p. 457). This warning regarding the formidable decline of foreign language study throughout all levels of the educational system was published in the 1979 President’s Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies. Yet, despite this warning, 8.6% of U.S. colleges and universities had no enrollment in languages other than English in fall 2016 (Looney & Lusin, 2019).

Education plays a vital and influential role in the evolution of America’s social, political, economic, and cultural identity. As educational philosophies change throughout history, the curriculum and student learning objectives mirror the transformation. The subject matter taught in schools is critical because schools provide academic skills and opportunities for students to develop relationships, emotional skills, and identities. Furthermore, schools reflect their local communities and offer young people opportunities for community and political involvement. Thus, the importance of educational philosophies and curricular content and their impact on American culture cannot be overstated.

According to Trow (1972), at the beginning of the 20th century approximately 250,000 students, which represented 4% of the population between 18 and 21 years of age, were enrolled in colleges and universities. By 1920 that number more than doubled. By 1940 college enrollment had increased to 1.5 million, and in 1960 the number increased to 3.25 million, representing about 33% of the college-age population. Within this time period, higher education grew from a system of small and medium-sized institutions into a system including large universities. This higher education system had transformed from mostly private institutions seen as elitist for a privileged few into predominantly public institutions open to the general population. As a result, universities could no longer identify with a single academic role.

Unfortunately, expansion often resulted in conflict between professional schools and the humanities. The forces underlying the enormous growth in higher education and the conflicts

between the professional schools and the humanities generally revolved around economics and the demand for jobs. Trow maintained that the emphasis on economics had “transformed higher education from a privilege into a right” (1972, p. 62) and eventually into a job-centered obligation. The resultant policy impetus can be seen today in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and the College-and-Career-Ready (CCR) Standards (Malin et al., 2017). The threat to the humanities, which, according to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, is defined as “the study of languages, literature, history, film, civics, philosophy, and the arts” (as quoted in Spencer, 2014, p.400), is critical since job preparedness continues to be the focus of a college education.

Beginning with Greek and Roman philosophers, the humanities have centered on critical thinking skills and civic duty. This fundamental ethos has shaped American democracy and remains critical in the crusade for equality (McKinney, 2017). Many noteworthy eras in history have resulted in transfigurations of American educational philosophy, the relative importance of the humanities, and especially the importance of foreign language learning. For example, the 1957 Russian launch of Sputnik fueled panic of the possible proliferation of communism throughout the world and resulted in an educational emphasis in the U.S. on math, science, and foreign languages (Brecht & Rivers, 2000).

During the 1960s and 1970s, interest in foreign language learning subsided (Lambert, 1985). However, concern over the quality of education, aided first by a report that SAT scores had fallen continually since the mid-1960s and secondly by studies documenting poor performance in all subject areas compared to performance levels in other countries, brought a call for educational reform. This call resulted in the 1983 report of the U.S. National Commission on Excellence in Education (Ravitch, 1990). Foreign language was named an at-risk area in this report, and many in Congress rallied to support the nation's need for foreign language studies. For example, the former Senator Paul Simon (D-IL) authored and published *The Tongue-Tied*

*American: Confronting the Foreign Language Crisis* supporting foreign language learning (Moeller & Abbott, 2018).

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, following the 2001 World Trade Center attack, emphasis focused even more directly on the usefulness of foreign language study (Modern Language Association, 2007). However, this spike in interest did not last, and foreign language degrees, as well as other degrees from the humanities, took a back seat to the emphasis on financial remuneration. In 2010 and 2011, according to the American Community Survey, recent college graduates with degrees in the liberal arts and humanities had an unemployment rate of 9% and an approximate annual salary of \$30,000. In contrast, recent college graduates with engineering degrees had an unemployment rate of 7.4% and average earnings of approximately \$54,000 (Carnevale et al., 2013). Thus, the humanities find it difficult to compete with professional schools when salaries are the main concern.

Moreover, today's focus on community colleges serves to undermine foreign language study. President Barack Obama, in a speech introducing the American Graduation Initiative, declared that community colleges have the most significant impact on meeting the workforce demands of the 21st century and that "many young people are saving money by spending 2 years at community college before heading to a 4-year college" (Obama, 2009). Students coming from community colleges into 4-year institutions have generally met their general education requirements and see no reason to take a foreign language course, much less to entertain the idea of starting a new major. This emphasis on education as a program for workforce development diminishes the role of the humanities in an era when education should be the agent of social change (Kuntz et al., 2011).

As educational philosophies change because of economic, social, or political factors, the one constant is the focus on economic wherewithal. Increasingly, higher education has centered on economic potential and career readiness. This capitalistic mindset with its inextricable link to

education demands pedagogy that is responsive to industry since students are taught from an early age that a good education is the launching pad to economic furtherance (Theobald, 2016). Thus, despite its foundational role in society, the study of humanities has fallen victim to devaluation within the world of academia, and, as a result, universities have suffered the eradication of courses and even entire departments (Couto Costa, 2019). This devaluation of foreign language study has a negative impact on America's economic security and national defense (Stein-Smith, 2015).

### **Statement of the Problem**

The decline in foreign language as a degree choice is a problem in higher education that affects the individual, the community, and society as a whole (MLA, 2007). To understand the decline in foreign language majors, it is necessary to understand how students choose their majors. While a substantial amount of research exists on factors influencing the choice of major, a gap exists in relating these factors, and possibly others, to the choice of foreign language as a major.

Numerous researchers have studied the choice of major. The majority have found economics to be pivotal in this choice (Beggs et al., 2008; Long et al., 2015). One study noted that when making a choice based on expected earnings, men are more influenced by the variable than are women, and whites more than people of color (Montmarquette et al., 2002). While noting the importance of economic utility on the selection of a major, researchers have also concentrated on other key variables. For example, research demonstrates that a student's sociocultural background is important (Leppel et al., 2001; Ma, 2009; Simpson, 2001). Some studies point to self-efficacy and personality and the effect they have on the choice of major (Bourdieu, 1993; Porter & Umbach, 2006). Other studies speak to the culture of the university department and the impact it has on choice and persistence with a major (Hartnett & Centra, 1977; Pascarella et al., 1988; St. John et al., 2004). Additionally, researchers have looked at



race and gender to determine their influence on the decision of a major (England & Li, 2006; Hagedorn et al., 1996; Ma, 2011; Polachek, 1978.) Several studies focus on motivation as a determinant in choice of major (Burton et al., 2006; DeMarie & Aloise-Young, 2003). Other researchers have focused on the impact of family and other influential people in a student's life as important factors in degree choice (Sonaike, 2007; McDill & Coleman, 1965).

Despite the plethora of studies that contextualize the college major choice, research relating the selection process specifically to foreign language and the decline in foreign language majors is lacking. The standing of foreign language learning in America has been part of both academic and public conversations for multiple years but with little effect (Stein-Smith, 2019). The majority of the research relating foreign language learning to the generalized variables in choice of major centers on motivation, but even these studies are limited in number. For example, few studies explore the motivational perspective of foreign language learning as it relates to university-level students (Busse & Walter, 2013). Research shows that pedagogy and curriculum related to college courses affect the choice of foreign language as a major, yet few empirical studies exist to determine what styles work best (Lambert, 1985; Pufahl & Rhodes, 2011). Since studies indicate that students make the greatest gains in cultural awareness and also profit economically, socially, and intellectually to the greatest degree with advanced levels of foreign language study (Curtain, 1990), more research is needed to understand the factors involved in foreign language as a college degree choice.

Researchers emphasize the need for further study on “who or what” influences the choice of a college major (Pearson & Dellman-Jenkins, 1997). This question can be addressed by looking at four key areas. First, researchers stress the need to address the economic role in the selection of a major (Arcidiacono, 2004; D’Agruma, & Hardy, 1997; Damari et al., 2017). Secondly, more research is needed to examine the role of interpersonal relationships in major choice (Awad, 2014; Fox et al., 2019; Pufahl & Rhodes, 2011). Third, researchers also call for

studies to advance the understanding of motivation in the selection of a major and how this variable relates to the decline in foreign language majors (Atitsogbui, 2014; Awad, 2014; Busse & Walter, 2013; Fox et al., 2019.) Lastly, further investigation is needed in the areas of university curriculum and pedagogy. Researchers call for empirical studies to compare the effects of diverse teaching methods (Busse & Walter, 2013; Lambert, 1985; Pufahl & Rhodes, 2011). Also, to investigate this fourth key area, further studies are warranted on community-based learning as a curricular strategy for advancing the objectives of a liberal arts education and reversing the decline in foreign language majors (George-Paschal et al., 2019; Keen & Hall, 2009).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the decline in foreign language majors at a small, private, Midwestern university by identifying factors influencing the choice of college majors and exploring initiatives to strengthen the foreign language program.

The decline in foreign language majors, and in the humanities in general, coincides with the movement of the economy. The recessions since 1980, including the Great Recession of 2007-2009, have resulted in dwindling allocation of mid-level skill jobs and jobless recoveries. These recessions plus the current COVID-19 recession have distorted the conception of educational conversance. The economic downturns have contributed to the furtherance of college majors that avow economic promise while the number of humanities majors dwindles (Spencer, 2014). Within universities, the humanities often suffer decreased funding and are seen as impractical (Laverty, 2015). Although interest in the subject matter should be the criterion by which students choose their major, by in large, students find themselves in situations where they must choose between many parameters and are often forced to concede intellectual attainment to economic utility (Zemsky et al., 2005).

This current research sought to examine student choice related to the selection of a foreign language major. The theoretical framework centers on the student choice construct, which encompasses students sequentially making choices in situational contexts. These choices are influenced by individual experience, family backgrounds, and environmental variables. The student choice construct enables researchers to study disparate college students and include their distinct histories, values, and narratives in the inquiry. The research can also delve into the role of social and cultural experiences to examine how they impact the choice of whether to attend college, which university to attend, and, as pertains to this study, what course of study to pursue (Paulsen, 1990; Paulsen & St. John, 1997, 2002; Perna, 2006; St. John, Asker, & Hu, 2001; St. John, Paulsen, & Starkey, 1996).

As students negotiate the different choices throughout their university experience, they are guided by different factors. This study, operating from the interpretivist paradigm, sought to identify the factors that influence students to choose a foreign language major by exploring their subjective experiences and socially constructed knowledge with the goal of discovering strategies to strengthen the foreign language program at a small, private, Midwestern university.

### **Research Questions**

Specifically, this research was guided by the following questions as they relate to students at this university.

1. What factors influence students to choose a foreign language major?
2. What factors influence students to choose majors other than a foreign language?
3. Are there differences and similarities in the factors influencing major choice identified by students majoring in a foreign language and those not majoring in a foreign language?
4. What initiatives do students suggest as ways to strengthen the foreign language program?

### **Significance of the Study**

This research, using qualitative methodology, aspired to contribute to the knowledge surrounding the choice of college major and extend this knowledge to focus on the choice of foreign language as a major. Specifically, in an effort to address the decline in foreign language majors at a small, private, Midwestern university, this study produced insight into why students choose to major in a foreign language and the factors that influence that choice. Additionally, by employing the single case study design, students had the opportunity to speak about their experiences and offer suggestions to bolster the foreign language program. The impact of the findings proved to be significant for this small, private, Midwest university by generating ideas to increase the number of foreign language majors.

This case study may have broader significance as well. According to Bhattacharya (2017), case studies are used for “in-depth understanding and can also be used to inform policies or to uncover contributing reasons for cause-and-effect relationship” (p. 109). In keeping with this explanation, this study explored the causal variables in major choice through the in-depth experiences of foreign language majors and produced data that practitioners and administrators can use to inform strategies and policies aimed at reversing the decline in foreign language majors, a problem relevant in the field of foreign language education throughout the United States.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Case study.** A research methodology that entails a concentrated “study of a single unit... a spatially bounded phenomenon... observed at a single point in time or over some delimited period of time” (Gerring, 2004, p. 342).

**College major.** The area of study that determines the projected career path a student chooses to pursue. This research looks at the selection process and the key variables that eventually lead to the choice of major, in particular with regard to foreign language.

**Community-based learning.** In this study, community-based learning refers to curricular strategies that give students the opportunity to learn from the community while addressing community-identified needs.

**Curriculum.** In this study, curriculum refers to the academic content and lessons taught in specific college courses.

**Economic Utility.** For this research, economic utility refers to the profound influence that the marketplace has on educational decision making. Additionally, it entails the tendency of students to choose majors based on economic promise instead of intellectual, social, and cultural pansophy.

**Extrinsic motivation.** According to the American Psychological Association, extrinsic motivation is an external impetus to participate in an activity based on the associated likelihood of being rewarded or punished.

**Foreign language.** The term “foreign language” refers to a language not commonly spoken in the country of the speaker. The term has been replaced in many schools by “world language,” defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as “a language used in many different countries.” The vast majority of the literature still employs the term “foreign language.” According to Moeller and Catalano (2015), “A language is considered foreign if it is learned largely in the classroom and is not spoken in the society where the teaching occurs” (p.327). In keeping with that definition, this study will generally incorporate the wording “foreign language.”

**Interpretivist paradigm.** The framework for research derived from a belief that reality and knowledge are multiple, subjective, and socially constructed (Creswell, 2013).

**Intrinsic motivation.** According to the APA, intrinsic motivation is the desire to participate in an activity that stems from a genuine curiosity regarding the activity itself as opposed to any extraneous advantage which might be gained from the participation.

**MLA.** The Modern Language Association of America, founded in 1883, is the principal professional organization for language scholars. Today it boasts membership in over 100 countries. The group conducts research and publishes several scholarly journals.

**Passion.** "A strong inclination toward a self-defining activity that people like (or love), find important, and in which they invest time and energy (Vallerand & Verner-Filion, 2013).

**Pedagogy.** In this study, pedagogy refers to the range of techniques and methods involved in the practice of teaching.

**Self-Determination Theory.** The SDT construct differentiates between autonomous motivation, which can include both intrinsic and extrinsic sources, and controlled motivation, which equates to external regulation where the motivation consists of possible rewards or punishment. The theory assumes that individuals want to experience a connection to other people, competence, and autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

**Self-efficacy.** This term is defined as an individual's belief in his or her ability to implement behaviors necessary to effect specific performance goals. Self-efficacy beliefs are grounded in the conviction that the individual has the power to regulate and control his or her motivation, behavior, goal achievement, and decision-making processes (Bandura, 1997).

**Social constructivism.** This theory asserts that all knowledge is subjective and that knowledge and meaning are created through social interactions with others (Creswell, 2013).

**Socio-educational model of second language acquisition.** This theory asserts that second language learning involves both aptitude and motivation and that the cultural beliefs about the second language community will influence the motivational component of the process (Gardner, 1985). The model specifies two classifications of motivational orientation: integrative and instrumental. Integrative orientation, which is also referred to as intrinsic orientation, centers on a student's personal interest in the culture and the people of the target language, whereas an

instrumental orientation centers on the student's possible utilitarian advancement, for example, the desire to obtain a higher grade (Gardner & Lambert, 1959).

**Student choice construct.** This empirically tested theoretical framework maintains that students make sequences of choices in situational contexts and that these choices are informed by their diverse backgrounds, family circumstances, and environmental factors. This construct allows for sociological and cultural influences in the contributing determinants of choice (Paulsen, 1990; Paulsen & St. John, 1997, 2002; Perna, 2006; St. John, Asker, & Hu, 2001; St. John, Paulsen, & Starkey, 1996).

### **Summary**

Since the late 19th century, economic utility has been a focal point in the U.S. education system (Clark et al., 1994). The emphasis on work-force preparedness has become central in the choice of a college major (Couto Costa, 2019; Trow, 1972). This view of college as a launching platform for future economic wherewithal has undermined the role of the humanities at a time when contemporary global society necessitates an understanding of languages, cultures, and history (Kuntz et al., 2011; Stein-Smith, 2015). Despite this societal urgency, the most recent report by the MLA shows more than a 15% decline in the study of foreign languages at the college level between 2009 and 2016 (Looney & Lusin, 2019).

The purpose of this case study was to investigate the decline in foreign language majors at a small, private, Midwestern university by identifying factors influencing the choice of college majors and exploring initiatives to strengthen the foreign language program. Although numerous studies have dealt with the key variables in the selection of a major (Beggs et al., 2008; Bourdieu, 1993; Burton et al., 2006; DeMarie & Aloise-Young, 2003; England & Li, 2006; Hagedorn et al., 1996; Hartnett & Centra, 1977; Leppel et al., 2001; Long et al., 2015; Ma, 2009; McDill & Coleman, 1965; Montmarquette et al., 2002; Pascarella et al., 1988; Polachek, 1978; Porter & Umbach, 2006; St. John, Hu, et al., 2004; Simpson, 2001; Sonaike, 2007), few studies

have investigated the choice of foreign language per se as a major (Busse & Walter, 2013; Lambert, 1985; Pufahl & Rhodes, 2011). This study will address that gap.

The student choice construct was used as the theoretical framework to understand why and how students decide to seek a degree in foreign language. In order to identify factors that influence students in their choice of major, semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants who had chosen foreign language majors and with elementary-level foreign language students who had chosen majors other than a world language. An analysis of the data from these two groups established the key influential factors in major choice and the difference and similarities of these factors as identified by students majoring in a foreign language and those majoring in a subject other than a foreign language.

Additionally, the analysis, which explored the students' subjective experiences and socially constructed knowledge, provided valuable insight to inform strategies to bolster the foreign language program at this small, private, Midwestern university. It is hoped that the insight gleaned from this study might also benefit other comparable universities experiencing a decline in foreign language enrollment.



## **Chapter 2: A Review of the Literature**

This chapter reviews literature related to college students' decision-making processes regarding the choice of major. It begins with an overview of foreign language study and the decline in foreign language majors, which leads to the theoretical framework for this research. The explanation of the theoretical construct is followed by the emerging themes which, according to an abundance of research, are the key factors that influence major choice. The discussion of each of these key factors segues into the summary of the review of literature findings. The chapter ends with a reiteration of the purpose of this case study.

### **Overview of Foreign Language Study**

The benefits of the humanities, including the study of foreign languages, are unmistakable. Studies in the humanities ask students to conceptualize different linguistic and theoretical possibilities, which in turn link them to others in place and time. Through this unending quest regarding the nature of man, humanistic studies continue infinitely since the meaning lies in what is gained from the pursuit, not the answer to the question itself (Lavery, 2015). One study elaborated on this idea by pointing out that daily activities, such as making commitments, sharing stories, and reacting to adversity, are incredibly diverse in every culture and that it is only through the study of distinct cultures, historical eras, and theoretical viewpoints that students can grow in understanding and sensitivity (Bøyum, 2007).

Unfortunately, foreign language learning, which acts as a door to understanding diverse cultures, has never been a constant in the American educational system. Although the 1958 National Defense Education Act aroused interest in foreign language study, the trend did not continue, and students did not advance to a level of proficiency (Hamayan, 1986). More recently, a major setback for foreign language instruction came in the form of the 2002 No Child Left Behind Act. Due to its focus on mathematics and reading skills, some school districts

eliminated foreign language and other program options in an effort to rechannel their resources with the hope of producing better scores on mandatory standardized testing (Manzo, 2008).

Complacency with regard to foreign language learning, due in large part to the relative geographic isolation of the US and the fact that English is the international language, has resulted in a distorted perception of well-being which creates political, economic, and social vulnerabilities. The 1986 terrorist attack on a Berlin discotheque serves as an example of political vulnerability. According to Hamayan (1986), the event possibly could have been avoided had the U.S. intelligence service, which was intercepting the messages, had someone on staff who spoke Berber. With regard to US businesses, those corporations whose employees are not able to meet the cultural and linguistic needs of international clients are economically vulnerable and often lose big accounts. For example, sales of the Chevrolet Nova remained low in Latin America until the auto manufacturer changed the name of the car after learning that in Spanish “Nova” (no va) means “it doesn’t go” (Hamayan, 1986). Concerning social vulnerabilities, Hamayan (1986) makes the argument that students who do not have the opportunity to learn a foreign language beginning at an early age and continuing throughout their years of schooling are deprived of a global education which includes knowledge and understanding of diverse cultures and effective communication skills.

Tochon (2009) in an article that postulates the study of foreign language as the key to global understanding adds to Hamayan’s argument by citing several studies which have resulted in a preponderance of evidence. These studies demonstrate that studying foreign language increases global cooperation and goodwill, improves employment opportunities, boosts native language precision, enhances scores on college exams (incrementally with each year of language studies), magnifies creativity, enhances general cognitive function, augments understanding of oneself, and deepens understanding of one’s own culture. Tochon (2009) also

points out that countries whose students do not gain proficiency in other languages in essence isolate themselves and lose political standing.

Most countries around the world, recognizing the many benefits of knowing more than one language, are moving toward foreign language study at a very young age. Acknowledging that language studies begun at an early age offer students the opportunity to acquire advanced language skills over time, several countries have made foreign language classes compulsory in the lower grades. Unfortunately, the majority of students in the United States are not given the opportunity to embark on their foreign language study until middle or even high school (Pufahl & Rhodes, 2011).

Despite research indicating that students gain the greatest utilitarian and ideological benefits when they reach advanced levels of language proficiency and cultural awareness (Curtain, 1990), many students discontinue their studies before achieving the degree of proficiency necessary to capitalize fully on the benefits of foreign language study. This phenomenon is confirmed by the 2019 MLA report which reveals a 15.3% decline in foreign language enrollment at the university level within a period of only seven years (Looney & Lusin, 2019).

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study approached the decline in foreign language majors through an epistemology of constructivism and the lens of choice. Although the investigation addressed the previously defined self-determination theory and the socio-educational model of second language acquisition, these concepts were discussed within the limited context of motivational theories and did not constitute the conceptual framework of this study. The theoretical framework for this study was the student choice construct as derived from social constructivism, the theory which asserts that knowledge and meaning are subjective and created through social interactions with others. As previously defined, the student choice construct, which has been empirically tested,

asserts that students make choices in a sequential manner and in situational contexts. Self-efficacy, previously defined as an individual's belief in the endogenous power to implement behaviors necessary to effect performance goals, is implied within this framework. The student choice theory contends that choices are influenced by students' individual experiences as well as family settings and environmental circumstances. The construct can be applied to the choice of attending or not attending college, the choice of which college to attend, and the choice of which major to pursue. (Paulsen, 1990; Paulsen & St. John, 1997, 2002; Perna, 2006; St. John, Asker, & Hu, 2001; St. John, Paulsen, & Starkey, 1996). For example, sequential education choices begin with the evolution of postsecondary aspirations influenced by factors such as academic preparedness, socioeconomic status, family background, and peer influence. If the decision is made to attend college, then the next sequential choice is to decide on a particular college. Once at the university, students are faced with an array of choices including where to live, what campus organizations to join, what classes to take, and what major to select. Because this theoretical framework allows researchers to look at individual students and incorporate their values, personal narratives, and sociocultural experiences into the research, it was an excellent construct for this case study. Specifically, this investigation comprised individual interviews with students which entailed personal histories and experiences. Thus, in keeping with the purpose of case studies to serve as a bridge between theory and real life (Toloie-Eshlaghy et al., 2011), the student choice construct constituted an ideal theoretical framework for this research.

### **Themes Influencing Major Choice**

As the world becomes increasingly globalized, the need for those who are proficient in foreign languages also increases. Specifically, the skills acquired through the prolonged study of a foreign language result in proficiency in communication and increased cultural awareness and are necessary to understanding sociopolitical issues as well as the cultural foundations of society. Because data indicate a decline in foreign language enrollment in higher education and

because colleges across the United States had to close 651 foreign language programs between 2013 and 2016 (Looney & Lusin, 2019), research into the causes of this problem of attrition is necessary.

Although a substantial amount of research exists on factors influencing the choice of major, a gap exists in relating these factors to foreign language as a degree choice. The preponderance of literature suggests four themes as factors that influence the selection of a college major. This case study explored these four themes during semi-structured interviews at a small, private, Midwestern university to determine which of these factors, and possibly others, were influential in the students' choice to major or not major in a foreign language.

Based on scholarly research, the following four common themes evolved and are discussed in this review of literature: 1) the influence of economic outcomes in the choice of a college major; 2) the function of interpersonal relationships in choosing a major; 3) the impact of intrinsic interest or motivation related to major choice; and 4) the role of college curriculum and pedagogy in the selection of a major.

### ***The Influence of Economic Outcomes in the History of American Education***

The history of education in America reflects the philosophical underpinnings of its founding; and, from its inception, the educational system has played a vital role in the development of the sociopolitical and economic structures of society. In the 17th century, English philosopher John Locke declared man in his natural state as greedy and in need of an economic theory to advance his drive for prosperity. As a result, he "cleared an intellectual path that paved the way for capitalistic enterprises" (Theobald, 2016, p. 29). Capitalism initially traveled to the American colonies with the Puritans under the charter of the Virginia Company of London. By way of a long and multifaceted journey with different regional paths, capitalism had

become the essence of the US economy by the mid-nineteenth century and had transformed America by the late 1800s (Clark et al.,1994).

Because capitalism has served as the economic foundation of the United States since the late 1800s, an educational system that reflects and promotes capitalistic ideas has become the logical consequence. Thus, students are indoctrinated at an early age into the belief that education is all about competition. The goal is to have the best GPA and the best resume to get into the best colleges and to obtain the most lucrative job possible (Theobald, 2016). The tenacious link between capitalism and education produces a mechanistic model of teaching that responds to the demands of industry and results in students accepting academic incompetence (Freire, 1973).

The history of schooling in the United States also reveals the struggle between two competing philosophies regarding the nature of man. Adherents of Locke's philosophy have looked at schooling as a means to economic prosperity. The other philosophy, which at times has characterized education in the United States, is that of Montesquieu. This French philosopher believed that man by nature is communal, not competitive, and committed to helping others. In short, Montesquieu saw education as a provision for achieving collective good (Theobald, 2016).

Throughout the early part of the 1800s, education in the US generally adhered to Montesquieu's philosophy due to the popular aversion to the excessiveness of capitalism as well as to the convincing arguments denouncing capitalism set forth by Karl Marx. However, the tide began to change in 1859 when Darwin published his theory of evolution and natural selection. In 1882, sociologist Herbert Spencer arrogated the idea that organisms with positive traits are more likely to survive and produce offspring by applying the theory to humans and coining the phrase "survival of the fittest." The principle when applied to learning provided the justification to focus education on those who had the best chance of economic success while

disregarding the schooling of the poor and the minorities. Hence, schools developed tracks and lanes and emerged as a vehicle to pigeonhole students toward their predetermined economic future (Theobald, 2016).

A progressive view of education in opposition to this determinist philosophy made some headway beginning in the 1890s and through the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Progressivists contended that the only way to ensure social evolution was to base education on Montesquieu's belief of man as a social being who seeks the well-being of the community. They insisted that all students need an education to include history and current events to prepare them as full members of society able to make decisions regarding politics. The progressivists further posited that education should include community responsibility to meet the immediate needs of the students and their locality (Theobald, 2016). John Dewey, the preeminent scholar and educational reformer during the first half of the twentieth century, saw education as playing a pivotal role in shaping America's socioeconomic, political, and cultural values. As such, he focused on the importance of the humanities and human development as opposed to economic utility. In his book *The School and Social Progress* (1907), Dewey insisted, "The aim [of education] is not the economic value of the products, but the development of social power and insight" (p. 32).

With its focus on the here and now, the common man, the preservation of human dignity, and the goal of ushering in a society distinguished by justice and equity, the progressivists had a fair share of supporters during the depression. However, World War II with its emphasis on military might and production to support the war effort killed the progressive educators' hope for a humanities-centered curriculum. Instead, learning became laser focused on individual competition, international competition, and education for the purpose of productivity (Theobald, 2016).

By the 1950s, economic competence was such a mainstay of education and so ingrained in the American psyche that it was working its way down to the primary school level. According to college educators Gavian and Nanassy (1955), introducing economics at the secondary education level was too late. They insisted that economic competence needed to become a goal at the elementary level.

On the other end of the educational spectrum are the circumstances which have led to an obsession with economic potential at the university level. The majority of colleges until the 19<sup>th</sup> century had faculties of law, medicine, and theology (Wilshire, 1990). The focus in higher education was theological in nature. Subjects such as mathematics and the classics were taught to help prepare clergymen to interact with the wealthy members of society (Pulliam, 1991). However, during the Progressive Era, the US Congress established land grant universities with a practical curriculum designed to teach agriculture and mechanical arts to the general population (Theobald, 2016). The image of the university as an elitist sanctuary was further eroded by the G.I. Bill following World War II. Also, at this time the science faculties began partnerships in federal research projects (Zemsky et al., 2005).

The 1960s ushered in further transformation of higher education. As a result of the sociopolitical call for equality, the face of the university changed, federal student aid increased, and a more diversified, individualized curriculum ensued. The 1980s revealed more pressure from industry and the federal government which resulted in a push for economic preparedness at the expense of intellectual scholarship (Theobald, 2016). This trend has continued, and today higher education is a market-driven venture. The university culture centers on competition for the best students, the best athletes, the best faculty as well as on commercialism driven by marketing research. Universities have become degree mills. In short, intellectual passion has been replaced by a diploma that equates to an employment resume (Zemsky et al., 2005).



Numerous studies lend credence to the idea that the focus of college study is not intellectual passion but employment opportunity. One study, which compared factors through the use of a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to determine the level of significance, indicated male college students, in particular, choose their major based on job opportunities, salary levels, and career advancement (Malgwi et al., 2005). A two-part study employing qualitative methods and quantitative methods, respectively, placed job characteristics among the top influences in determining a college major. Characteristics including salary, wage potential, benefits, advancement, prestige, work-life harmony, and post-graduate job opportunities were noted as important factors in determining the college major (Beggs et al., 2008). In another study, researchers compiled statistics from several sources including the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System and Current Population Survey data as well as data from public universities in Washington state and data regarding state-level unemployment. Using this data, they analyzed the connection between labor market earnings and college major choices and found statistically significant correlations between changes in wages by occupation and consequent changes in college majors from 1982 until 2012 (Long et al., 2015).

### ***The Function of Interpersonal Relationships on the Choice of College Major***

In conjunction with the economic factor in the selection of a college major, advice from other individuals is an important consideration in the equation. One study revealed that the engagement of parents with regard to educational decisions begins while a child is in middle school. When the student is in 11th and 12th grades, the focus narrows, and the question of accessible majors enters the picture (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). Another study conducted in 1997 revealed that 19% of entering freshmen cited their parents as the most significant factor influencing which major to pursue. The students indicated that teachers were the second most influential group in their decision (Pearson & Dellman-Jenkins, 1997). The

influence of parents was confirmed in 2015 when an investigation employing a phenomenological perspective, grounded theory methodology, and semi-structured interviews looked at undecided students and the decisions they made during their freshmen year. The data revealed that, much more than academic advising, parental influence was the decisive factor in the selection of a major and in career decisions (Workman, 2015).

Researchers using multinomial logit analysis to study the effects of parental occupation and concomitant socioeconomic effects in the determination of college majors demonstrated that the occupational backgrounds of the parents were a decisive factor in determining the major choice of their children. Both male and female students with fathers in professional occupations were inclined to choose majors in engineering and sciences, whereas sons more than daughters chose to major in business (Leppel et al., 2001). A quantitative study using data from the National Education Longitudinal Study 1988–1994 (NELS: 88–94) and based on a nationally representative sample of adolescents tracked from high school through college found that parents in a lower socioeconomic status encouraged children to choose their major in subjects that would lead to lucrative jobs rather than subjects reflecting traditional gender roles (Ma, 2009). Other studies indicate that parents also influence their children's choice of major based from a gender perspective. For example, studies of female college students consistently reveal that those who come from households where their mothers work outside the home are more likely to choose their mother as their role model and to pursue studies leading to a prestigious career (Douvan, 1976). One study reported that mothers who hold four-year college degrees are especially influential on their children's career paths (Smith, 2000). And another study indicated mothers will have an increasing influence on daughters' career paths as the number of women achieving higher levels of education enter the labor force (Adya & Kaiser, 2005). A study using multinomial logit modeling indicated that social class hierarchy can reproduce itself in the educational system often having the compelling effect of influencing

students to choose a major that would allow them to continue in their parents' footsteps, even though such a choice may not represent a lucrative career (Simpson, 2001). A qualitative analysis of videotaped conversations between parents and adolescents to investigate the involvement of family in career development revealed that children from collectivist cultures may have their career path chosen for them. Adolescents were expected to make career choices based on being faithful to the values, traditions, and beliefs of their cultural heritage (Young et al, 2001). The self-determination theory, presented previously in the definition of terms, refers to this duty as an external prescription where the motivation consists of presumable rewards or punishment.

Besides parental influence, and secondarily teacher guidance, peer influence is also impactful on the choice of major. For example, one study found that the influence of both family and peers is more important than the socioeconomic status of the family on college plans and that the types of peer groups with which a student associates influence the pursuit of a particular academic path (McDill & Coleman, 1965). Further evidence of the importance of peer influence in the choice of college majors comes from a study at West Point. The study looked at the effect of peers in educational settings at the United States Military Academy and noted common occurrences that influence the outcomes of all those in the peer group. These "common shocks," as Lyle (2007) referred to them, include "the quality of the teacher, the sequence of daily instruction, the location of the classroom, or the seating configurations in the classroom" (p. 289). Lyle underscored evidence that common shocks interfere with studies that aim to determine the influence of peers. By setting up a model to avoid these possible biases, the author of the study concluded that peer groups at West Point affected both the choice of major and the decision to remain in the military (Lyle, 2007).

However, a research study on the influence of peers at Dartmouth College indicated that while one's peers have an impact on grade point average and on decisions regarding social

organizations, such as fraternity selection, peer influence did not affect the selection of a major (Sacerdote, 2001). In this Dartmouth College study, one's peers were limited to freshmen dormitory roommates randomly assigned.

Another study reflecting a much larger sampling in which the subjects were not randomly assigned but rather shared common academic interests revealed that a student's peer group could be influential. Specifically, using data from U.S. medical schools collected by surveying 47,755 students who graduated in 1996, 1997, or 1998, researchers examined the impact of peer groups and found that medical students hoping to become specialists benefitted from their peer group in making academic decisions. Those students seeking to be general practitioners also were influenced by peers but generally to a lesser extent. However, according to the researchers, the only strong evidence that peer groups affected the choice of specialty per se centered on gender, specifically high-performing females. Data revealed that in 2000, 42% of primary care specialists were women whereas only 29% of male doctors had chosen primary care as their specialty (Arcidiacono & Nicholson, 2005).

This complex decision of selecting a major, influenced to differing degrees by the opinions of parents, teachers, and peers, involves choices that will not only affect the students' college career but rather will affect career possibilities for the remainder of their lives. Approximately a third of university students change their major at some point in their college career (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991); and unfortunately, as evidenced by one study, the majority of students arrive at these decisions without employing cognitive processing skills (Beggs et al., 2008). Thus, it should come as no surprise that a 2005 study cites meta-analytical evidence showing the number one life regret pinpointed by most Americans is their educational choice (Roese & Summerville, 2005).

***The Impact of Intrinsic Interest or Motivation in Selecting a College Major***

For better or for worse, the interests that students have at the time they determine their college major is a significant aspect of the decision-making process. DeMarie and Aloise-Young (2003) substantiated this fact in a study comparing 144 education students and 151 business majors. Their survey reported that approximately 98% of the students confirmed that interest was an important factor in the choice of a major. The interest level was higher among business students than education students during their freshmen year (DeMarie & Aloise-Young, 2003).

A 1999 study on student interest and the choice of major surveyed 321 art majors from three universities and looked at the students' investigation of their major, their estimation of the major as advancing quality of life, and the part exercised by forces such as income, parents, and role models. The researchers concluded that the maturity level of the student greatly affected the level of interest in the major. Specifically, juniors and seniors saw their major as leading to an improvement in the quality of their lives; and to them this abstract, transformative passion was more important than the potential for a lucrative career (Kimweli & Richards, 1999).

Because the personal interests of students affect their motivation, an examination of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, which are elements in the self-determination theory (SDT) of motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000), is warranted. According to Deci and Ryan, an essential factor in the self-determination theory is the important role that psychological needs play in establishing the connection between a person's goals and the regulatory methods through which the goals are pursued. Figuring into these psychological needs is the sense of perceived autonomy. The SDT model describes the degree to which a student's motivation hinges on controlling external factors as opposed to autonomous internal governance (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

More specifically, intrinsic motivation is completely autonomous and, as such, comes from within reflecting an individual's inherent interests and enjoyment in the activity at hand. Extrinsic motivation is externally controlled with the commitment to a task based on the promise of a reward or the threat of punishment. Between these two extremes is the most autonomous

form of extrinsic motivation, known as integrated motivation which occurs when individuals begin to integrate a task into their hierarchy of values and realize that although the task might not be enjoyable it is valuable and dovetails with what they consider important in their lives (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Research into motivation as it specifically relates to foreign language enrollment evolves from R.C. Gardner's (1985) socio-education model and the second language motivation theory. Dornyei and Ushioda (2011) trace the history of the second language motivation theory and divide it into "the social psychological period (1959-1990)," "the cognitive-situated period (in the 1990s)," and "the process-oriented period (since 2000)" (pp. 39-40). During the social psychological period, several important concepts emerged which helped to unravel the complex theory. The first was that of "orientation." Gardner and Lambert's (1959) investigation of high school students first presented this idea in terms of integrative versus instrumental orientation. The researchers proposed that those students with "integrative" focus study languages in order "to learn more about the language group, or to meet more and different people" whereas those with "instrumental" orientations decide to pursue foreign language learning for "the more utilitarian value of linguistic achievement" (p. 267). The research revealed that students with integrative motivation were more successful than their classmates with instrumental motivation (Gardner & Lambert, 1959).

Through other studies, integrative motivation – interchangeably referred to as intrinsic motivation – as related to world languages and cultures has become synonymous with the desire of students who indicate wanting to learn foreign languages in order to achieve the degree of proficiency needed to effectively communicate with native speakers in the target culture. This motivation for learning foreign languages is logical since autonomous governance, which includes intrinsic and integrated motivation, results in more positive effects regarding both psychological and academic fulfillment (Burton et al., 2006). Research indicates that the higher

the level of intrinsic motivation, which Gardner would refer to as integrative motivation, the more likely students are to continue their foreign language studies. For example, one investigation reported that of the high school language students who continued their studies, almost all maintained a resolute intrinsic drive (Ramage, 1990).

### ***The Role of College Curriculum and Pedagogy in Determining Choice of Major***

In addition to future employment, intrinsic motivation, and parental, teacher, and peer influence, the construct of college courses figures prominently into the major decision. The results of one quantitative study, which employed survey and experimental design, revealed that college major decisions are largely driven by the enjoyability of the coursework and the non-monetary facets of careers associated with particular majors (Wiswall & Zafar, 2015). Another study using qualitative methodology distinguished pedagogical approach as a dominant factor in major choice. This study specifically cited real-life experiences, practical components, and field experience as determinants in college major selection. The study noted that, although efforts involved in forming the partnerships and infrastructures to provide these experiences are considerable, these practical components proved invaluable in students' decisions to declare or eliminate a major from the possible options (Wright, 2018). Relating college curriculum and pedagogy to the choice of major and the persistence of women in STEM majors, Shapiro and Sax (2011) emphasized the importance of a curriculum designed to include real-world experiences and pedagogy that centers on collaborative learning as opposed to lecture.

The 2019 report by the MLA reveals that, in addition to offering traditional majors and minors, an increasing number of foreign language departments are trying to work in conjunction with other departments and university programs to create options with practical components which would appeal to students and parents focused on future employment. Because bilingual healthcare professionals are in demand and thus have an advantage in the job market, Illinois Wesleyan University has linked Spanish and nursing to devise a program enabling nursing

students to gain competence in Spanish through on-campus classes and study abroad. Other foreign language departments are adapting their majors and minors towards specific professions. For example, the University of Rhode Island offers an International Engineering Program. Iowa State University has advanced a program entitled Languages and Cultures for Professions. South Dakota State University has created a Workplace Intercultural Competence Certificate which affords beneficial credentials to students who combine courses in basic management with foreign language study. Additionally, the foreign language department at Georgia State University has reinvented itself by concentrating on language skills, cultural competency, and career preparedness to attract first-generation students and underrepresented communities (Looney & Lusin, 2019).

An application of this research can result in an extension of the curriculum to include community-based activities. These activities offer opportunities to involve peers and parents in programs that demonstrate the benefits of foreign language learning and that promote positive attitudes toward helping underserved populations. Studies on positive youth development theories speak of the importance of adolescents appropriating affirming self-concepts, positive social skills, and reciprocal behaviors. These studies, many from health and social sciences, also affirm the relevance of community engagement and volunteerism. One such study using a rigorous experimental design confirmed that youth like to band together with their peers and that their prosocial response of uniting with the intention to volunteer contributes to their acquiring a personal identity, to their understanding of society, and to a desire to continue serving the underserved (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2015).

Furthermore, these service-learning projects can involve parents in helping marginalized communities. A study using a mixed-methods approach indicated that community programs, which, for example, might focus on culture, fine arts, or recreation for underserved populations, can engage children in activities that promote positive communicative interplay between the



peers themselves as well as between the adults and the students (Acosta & Duggins, 2018). Such activities have a direct impact on the choice of a college major. One study employing an exploratory qualitative design determined that service-learning prepared students to enter a profession and solidified the choice of a major. The researchers noted one participant who recalled “love” for the major as a result of service-learning (George-Paschal et al., 2019).

A focus on community can also be incorporated directly into course content. This pedagogical approach of community-based learning can serve as a motivating factor influencing the choice of major. For example, in a constructivist study based on a limited sample, all of the participants reported that a service-learning course had influenced their decision to shift their career goals and pursue service-oriented professions (Jones & Abes, 2004). In today's educational culture with its emphasis on standardized testing and outcomes and the concomitant models of evaluation, the humanities in general and foreign languages, in particular, tend to be underrated. To counter this perception and to influence the choice of major, Butler University offers a hybrid course with a service-learning component. The course deals with political and social issues that compel ethical commitment to the underrepresented groups in the community. Students report benefiting from the course by improving their foreign language skills, by working with diverse groups which in turn increased their awareness and concern regarding social and political issues, by experiencing heterogeneity, by linking linguistic theory with creativity and critical thinking skills, and by increasing their motivation to expand their community involvement beyond the requirements of the class. Besides creating student interest and motivating students to continue studying Spanish, this model allows educators to connect teaching and their research to problems in the local community. Moreover, the hybrid class addresses the critical necessity to authenticate the germaneness of the humanities and foreign language studies (Carney, 2013).

After explaining the importance of learning foreign languages in a world focused on globalization and lamenting the limited number of college students who study languages long enough to realize communicative proficiency, one researcher linked the influential role that pedagogical approach and course content play in the choice of major. Based on qualitative methods, the study investigated the motivational constructs of foreign language students and the cultural aspects that spur them on to continue learning the language beyond the university's minimum requirements. Analysis of the data resulted in recommendations that instructors incorporate fun into the classroom, construct friendly and supportive relations with students, involve parents, develop collaborative programs between the university and the school districts, and offer community-learning experiences which can then be shared in the classroom (Awad, 2014). Unfortunately, the significance of pedagogy and course content as factors in major choice has not received much attention. According to a 2019 research study, ongoing empirical research is needed to communicate the importance of foreign language pedagogy and foreign language competence to the stakeholders in education (Fox et al., 2019).

### **Summary**

This review of literature examined four key variables which influence the choice of major and which were addressed by an abundance of valid research, the majority of which employed qualitative methods. First, the history of education was arranged chronologically revealing the extent to which the economic factor influences selection of a major. Secondly, the studies on interpersonal relationships demonstrated the importance of these associations in the selection of a college major. The influence of adults (comprised of parents and, to a lesser extent, teachers) and peers was sorted into two separate groups, and the data were compiled to demonstrate the breadth of demographics. The third inquiry concerning student interest and intrinsic motivation was grouped using the self-determination theory and second language

motivation theory. To examine the last variable regarding college curriculum and pedagogy, data were grouped by outcomes, and successful practices were arranged by universities.

These studies generally agree on the factors that influence the choice of major, but much discrepancy exists as to the degree of importance that each plays. Collectively, the results of existing research emphasize the need for further study on “who or what” influences the choice of a college major (Pearson & Dellman-Jenkins, 1997). For example, as a result of a recent inconclusive investigation on the relationship between student interest and major choice, researchers specified the need for further studies (Moore & Cruce, 2020). An important inquiry not covered in the review of literature is the extent to which school personnel (high school counselors, admissions staff, college advisors) affect the student’s choice of major.

The studies agree that emphasis on majoring in academic disciplines most likely to produce economic wherewithal has left the humanities playing defense. This reality appears in the decline of foreign language as a degree choice in higher education. Despite calls for internationalization to provide US students with a world-class education, policy makers have only paid lip service to this necessity. Thus, it is important to advocate for foreign language study as a necessary and beneficial part of global competence (Pufahl & Rhodes, 2011). Furthermore, because an estimated one third of university students change their majors at some point in their college career and because educators have little understanding of the reasoning behind these decisions, (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), it is also important to heed Fox, Corretjer, Webb, and Tian's (2019) call for more empirical studies. These studies should speak to decision-makers, advocacy groups, and the general public such that “empirical research will remain at the core of our work as language educators and continue to serve as a strong voice for the importance of language learning” (Fox et al., 2019, p. 486).

Although several studies address the decline in foreign language enrollment in universities, few explore the factors related to the decline. Because individuals, values, and

world views are always evolving, the factors that influence the choice of majors and their relative importance will change. Research into degree choice and its relationship to foreign language needs to be continual to help reverse the decline in foreign language majors and provide strategies to develop and strengthen world language programs. To that end, this case study added to the field of research by identifying factors influencing the choice of college majors and exploring initiatives to strengthen the foreign language program at a small, private university in the Midwest.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

This chapter focuses on the qualitative methodology, specifically a case study, designed to investigate the factors that influence students' choice of a college major and to explore initiatives that might strengthen the foreign language program at a small, private, Midwestern university. The chapter details the methods and process of the study by delineating the purpose, the research questions, the research design, and the chosen site for the study. A description of the research participants and the rationale for their purposeful selection is followed by a consideration of ethical issues and researcher positionality. A discussion on data collection through interviews and data analysis through coding follows. Validity, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations of the study are then reviewed. The chapter concludes with a summary of the methodology.

#### **Purpose**

Despite the substantial amount of research on factors influencing the choice of major, a gap exists in relating the influence of these factors, and possibly others, specifically to the choice of foreign language as a major. This case study investigated the decline in foreign language majors at a small, private, Midwestern university by identifying factors influencing the choice of college majors and exploring initiatives to strengthen the foreign language program.

#### **Research Questions**

Specifically, the study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What factors influence students to choose a foreign language major?
2. What factors influence students to choose majors other than a foreign language?
3. Are there differences and similarities in the factors influencing major choice identified by students majoring in a foreign language and those not majoring in a foreign language?

4. What initiatives do students suggest as ways to strengthen the foreign language program?

These questions were then used as the basis for interview questions through which to launch a discussion of the thematic factors that figure prominently into this complex process of choice.

### **Research Design**

This research was a holistic, single case study approach to investigate major choice within the real-world context of foreign language study at a small, private, Midwestern university. A single unit, such as a university, is commonly selected to exemplify an issue with the intent to provide a detailed description of the setting for the case (Creswell, 1998). The approach for this case study was in keeping with Yin's explanation of a holistic design in which a set of conditions is investigated "within its real-life context" (2003, p. 13). Because the context for this study was the decline in foreign language majors and because this decline is an issue at universities nationwide, this study is considered representative, which is one among five rationales that Yin (2003) identifies for a single case study.

### **Description of Research Site**

The small, private, Midwestern university where the study took place is typical of other colleges throughout the United States, which, according to a recent MLA report, are also experiencing a decline in foreign language enrollment (Looney & Lusin, 2019). The institution is a fully accredited, private, liberal arts and sciences university in the heartland offering both undergraduate and graduate programs. The university has a college of education and health sciences, a college of engineering and computer science, and a college of arts and sciences as well as a business school. The traditional, on-campus enrollment of full-time students in fall 2020 was 1,779. The university offers 82 majors.

Over several years, the university has seen a protracted downward trend in enrollment. From 2003 to 2020, the university experienced a substantial decline with enrollment dropping

by 18.6% from 2,185 to 1,779 undergraduate students (Fact Book, 2003-04 & Fact Book, 2020-21). During this same period, the number of foreign language majors dropped by 63.9%. Specifically, in 2003, Spanish majors numbered 21, French majors numbered 9, and German majors numbered 6 (Fact Book, 2003-04). As of fall 2020, the university had 10 Spanish majors, 2 French majors, and 1 German major (Fact Book, 2020-21).

### **Participants**

The target population for this study consisted of students enrolled in a small, private, Midwestern university. More specifically, the study targeted two groups of students: those students who had declared a major in a foreign language and an equal number of students who had declared a major other than a foreign language. The latter group was recruited from the second of two entry-level foreign language courses, designated as FL 112. Through interviews, the two groups of students were able to elaborate on the factors they considered most influential in their choice of major. Additionally, based on their subjective experiences, both groups were able to offer insight toward enhancing the foreign language program.

Once permission to conduct the research at the small, private, Midwestern university was authorized by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, and IRB approval from the University of Southern Indiana was granted, recruitment of participants began. In order to recruit participants majoring in a foreign language, a list of the email addresses of all foreign language majors 18+ years old was obtained from the registrar of the university and compared to the list maintained by the university's foreign language department to ensure that all the majors received an invitation to participate in the study.

To recruit students who had not declared a foreign language major, the email addresses of all students 18+ years old enrolled in elementary-level foreign language classes (designated FL 112) were also obtained. Only students enrolled in foreign language classes were recruited from the general student population to ensure that those selected for the study had experience

with college-level foreign language classes and had made a conscious choice not to pursue a foreign language major. Before invitations to participate were emailed to the FL 112 students, the roster was compared to the list of majors maintained by the foreign language department to ensure no duplication of invitations.

The sampling method for both interview groups was purposeful since participants were grouped according to a "predetermined criterion of importance" (Palinkas et al., 2015. p. 535) relevant to the research questions. The foreign language majors represented a homogeneous purposeful sample since these participants were selected due to their shared degree choice. The participants enrolled in the elementary-level foreign language classes who chose to major in a different field also represented purposeful sampling. Since FL 112 is required for all university students who cannot demonstrate proficiency in a world language equivalent to the completion of this beginning-level course, the participants enrolled in these classes were considered "typical" or "average" members of the population being studied in relation to the phenomenon (Palinkas et al, 2015).

The exclusion criteria for the study sprang from a need to limit the sample size of the FL 112 students. Because the small aggregate of foreign language majors from which to recruit totaled 13, the number of FL 112 students selected was limited to the number of majors who accepted the invitation to participate in the study.

### **Ethical Recruitment of Participants**

Foreign language majors as well as students enrolled in entry-level FL 112 classes who had chosen majors other than foreign language received invitations to participate in individual interviews to be conducted online via Zoom sessions. The invitation email explained the purpose of the study, the interview procedure, and the time commitment. The emails specified the date by which students in each group needed to confirm their desire to participate in the study and also noted that students could request a follow-up email to answer any questions they



might have. In addition, the emails sent to the students enrolled in the FL 112 classes explained that the total number of participants selected for the study could not exceed 13 and that selection would be based on the order in which their affirmative responses were received.

Consent forms accompanying emails explained that the students' participation was completely voluntary and that they might withdraw from the study with no negative consequences. The forms further delineated that they could withdraw from the study at any time before the interview session by expressing their desire in writing and that they could also choose to withdraw during the interview by terminating the conversation and leaving the Zoom session.

The consent form clarified that the Zoom interviews would be audio recorded. Participants were informed that the recordings as well as the corresponding transcriptions would be stored on a media storage device, would be secured in the foreign language office in a locked file cabinet, would be stored for a maximum duration of three years, and would then be destroyed by April 2024. Furthermore, the participants were assured their confidentiality would be protected since the data collected would not be identified by name or ID number.

As a means of incorporating reciprocity into the interview process, participants from both interview groups who completed the study were eligible to enter a prize drawing for a gift card. The emails to each group specified that upon completion of the interviews, a random drawing would be conducted. As a result of the drawing, one student majoring in foreign language and one student majoring in a field other than foreign language received a \$25 gift card. The intention of this action was to show appreciation for the time that these students forfeited by reading about the study, signing consent forms, emailing with any questions, participating in the 40-minute interview sessions, and checking the interview transcripts.

### **Reflexivity and Positionality**

As the researcher conducting this study, I acknowledge my longstanding love of foreign language study and my belief in its importance in connecting people and breaking barriers. I have had a long career in world language instruction at the middle school, high school, and college levels. Thus, in this study I am an “insider” with knowledge of curricular and pedagogical approaches and with the conviction that learning a language other than one’s own is fundamental to cultural respect and understanding in this global society.

As an assistant professor in the Foreign Languages and Cultures Department at the research site, I knew some of the students who volunteered for this study. However, I had no grading relationship with these participants, and none of these students were my advisees. Thus, my positionality did not likely affect data collection. Nevertheless, an imbalance of power always exists between the researcher and the participant. To avoid personal bias, I practiced reflexivity throughout the entire research process. Before the interviews began, I reflected on the dual perspectives of “insiders” and “outsiders” and the effect these perspectives have on the research process. Although an emic, or “insider,” perspective can magnify the scope of the research and establish a quicker and more complete acceptance of the investigator on the part of the study’s participants (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009), the power issue between the researcher as an “insider” and the participants as “outsiders” still exists. Thus, before this meeting with the participants, I reviewed the interview questions and pondered their scope while considering ways to mitigate this imbalance.

During data collection, I addressed the issue of positionality in the interviews by attempting “to make the relationship between and the influence of the researcher and the participants explicit” (Jootun, McGhee, & Marland, 2009, p. 45). I assured the participants that their responses would not be shared with any university personnel, clarified that there were no right or wrong responses, and articulated that they could express their views honestly without

fear of judgment or negative consequences. As part of the data collection, I also kept a reflexive journal to record personal thoughts, values, feelings, and beliefs that surfaced during the study.

During the data analysis process, I persisted by focusing on the concept of power which must be continually mediated between the researcher as an “insider” and the participants as “outsiders.” I advanced my understanding of the role of the researcher and of the participants’ responses by using the reflexive journal to analyze interview procedures, personal introspections, evolving perceptions, and decision points. By continuing these procedures and evaluating the “insider” versus “outsider” perspective throughout the steps of data analysis, I pursued an internal dialogue which, according to Dwyer and Buckle (2009), challenges assumptions, augments the scope of the research through its emic perspective, and culminates in an enriched outcome.

### **Data Collection**

Because the research questions in a case study drive the types of data to be collected, key themes from the body of literature, archival documents from the research site, and interviews of foreign language students were triangulated to develop a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon (Patton, 2015), which in this study was the decline in foreign language majors at a small, private, Midwestern university. Specifically, the data were used to identify the factors influencing the choice of major and to explore initiatives to strengthen the foreign language program.

To recruit participants for the interviews at the research site, a list of the email addresses of all foreign language majors 18+ years old was obtained from the university’s registrar and compared to the list maintained by the university’s foreign language department to ensure accuracy. The number of foreign language majors totaled 13. In addition, a list of email addresses of students enrolled in elementary-level foreign language classes (designated FL 112) who had selected majors other than foreign language was obtained and compared to the

list of majors to avoid duplication of invitations. Emails were sent to both groups inviting them to participate in the study, explaining the purpose of the research, and specifying that a follow-up email would be sent in response to any questions or concerns they might have. Consent forms accompanied emails. The invitation to the FL 112 students also explained that the number accepted into the study would be limited to no more than 13, the total number of foreign language majors, and that participants would be selected based on the order in which their responses to the invitation were received.

Students desiring to participate in the study were instructed to sign and return consent forms within 7 days after receiving the email attachment. A response rate of 40% from the foreign language majors and also from those majoring in other subjects was determined as acceptable prior to sending the invitations. Because the responses affirming a desire to participate in the study exceeded that percentage, no reminder emails were necessary. Instead, follow-up emails were sent to those students who confirmed their desire to participate in the study in order to set up a convenient time for the interview.

The interviews, which lasted approximately 40 minutes, were held online through Zoom, a cloud-based conferencing platform, and were audio recorded to ensure the accuracy of the subsequent transcriptions. The audio recordings of the sessions were downloaded to a password-protected computer and saved on a media storage device. Immediately following the interviews, automated transcripts of the recordings were produced and then downloaded to the password-protected computer and saved on the media storage device. These time-stamped transcripts were edited for accuracy. Participants were given the opportunity to review the transcripts of their interviews at a subsequent meeting before the start of the data analysis process. Finally, the media storage device containing audio recordings and automated transcripts, the printed transcriptions, and all notes were secured in a locked file cabinet to be

maintained for a maximum duration of three years before being destroyed no later than April 2024.

All the interviews followed a uniform pattern. First, the audio recording was activated, the participants were greeted, the purpose of the study was reiterated, and the written consent form was reviewed. The participants were reminded that the audio recordings, transcriptions, and all notes would be secured in a locked filing cabinet to protect their confidentiality and were then given an opportunity to ask any questions. Next, the participants were asked to verbally state that they had given written consent to participate in the study. The verbal affirmation of consent was recorded as part of the interview. Following the verbal consent, ice-breaker questions were tendered, providing the participants an opportunity to talk about themselves regarding their university studies. These questions included, for example, how long they had been enrolled at the university, when they became interested in their chosen major, and when they first started learning a second language (Appendix A).

Following the advice of Patton (2015), notes were taken during the interview to record reactions to questions and watch for any unusual occurrences. Additionally, key words mentioned by the participant in response to one question were listed so that they could be used as a reference for a subsequent question. Moreover, care was taken to identify any contradictory statements in order to revisit them during the interview; however, no contradictory statements were detected. All notes were added to the collection of data.

Semi-structured interviews proceeded with participants responding to open-ended interview questions that are aligned with the research questions and that exemplify the guiding themes in the body of literature that informed the study. The interview questions are listed below.

1. What factors influenced you in choosing your major? After the participants offered their subjective responses to this first interview question, the following sub-questions

were posed. These sub-questions reflect the thematic variables which appear in the preponderance of research studies as influential in the choice of major.

- a. Can you talk about peer influence as a factor in choosing your major?
  - b. Can you talk about the influence of family in your choice of major?
  - c. Can you talk about the influence of university personnel, such as admission counselors, academic advisors, and professors, as factors in choosing your major?
  - d. Can you talk about the influence of grade school or high school teachers or counselors in choosing your major?
  - e. Can you reflect on intrinsic interest/passion as a factor in your choice of major?
  - f. Can you talk about economic considerations, such as job availability, the chance of advancement, or salary levels, as a factor in choosing your major?
2. Can you tell me about the career path you will most likely pursue?
  3. What ideas can you suggest for strengthening the foreign language program?
  4. Do you have any thoughts you would like to add before we conclude the interview?

The above open-ended questions gave the participants opportunities to share subjective experiences and provide insight. These questions reflect the view held by Patton (2015) that “The truly open-ended question allows the person being interviewed to select from among that person’s full repertoire of possible responses those that are most salient” (p. 447). The sub-questions as part of the first interview question allowed for probing. These probing questions reflect the recommendation of Bhattacharya (2017) “to maintain consistency across interviews and to compare responses for each question for the participants in the study” (p. 127). Specifically, these probing questions were designed to relate and compare the responses of the foreign language majors to the responses of those who chose other majors and also to relate

and compare the responses of both interview groups to the key influential factors on major choice consistently appearing in the preponderance of research.

The second interview question, which asked the participants to talk about the career path they most likely will pursue, provided insight into their thought processes and the “why” surrounding their choice of major. According to Creswell (2013), the researcher’s objective in a case study is to interpret the meanings or make sense of the participants’ understanding of their place in the world. This question about future careers was pertinent since the participants’ answers revealed more about their understanding of their place in the world and added meaning to their responses regarding intrinsic motivation (sub-question e) and economic considerations (sub-question f) as related to their degree choice.

The third interview question, asking for suggestions to strengthen the foreign language program, offered an opportunity for the participants to discuss an additional theme cited in the literature as influential in the choice of major, that of college curriculum and pedagogy. This question further represents what Bhattacharya (2017) refers to as a structural question “designed to understand the structure of the environment within which the participants are making meaning of their experiences” (p. 133). The students’ understanding of the structure of different programs and departments within the university informed their responses and, in turn, provided potential strategies and policies to aid in reversing the decline in foreign language majors at this small, private, Midwestern university.

The fourth interview question, asking for any remaining thoughts, gave the participants a final opportunity to reflect on their previous responses and share any additional perspectives. After ample time was allowed for reflection, the participants were next asked if they had questions regarding the study itself. No one had questions. Thus, to conclude the interviews, all participants were reminded that their audio recording and transcription would be securely stored

for a maximum of three years in a locked file cabinet and that they would be given the opportunity for another meeting to review the edited transcription of the recording as soon as it was completed.

In summary, the semi-structured interview was the most appropriate data collection method for this single case study because it offered the greatest opportunity for a detailed description and interpretation of meaning with a focus on the individual(s) (Lodico et al., 2010). The open-ended ice-breaker questions (Appendix A) and the substantive open-ended questions plus the probing sub-questions (Appendix B) offered the participants the best means to express their ideas within the real-life context of the educational institution where the contemporary phenomenon was under study. Thus, the single case design and the data collection method enabled this study to investigate the decline in foreign language majors at a small, private, Midwestern university by identifying the factors that influenced the students' choice of major and by exploring initiatives to strengthen the foreign language program.

### **Data Analysis**

The data collected from the interviews included audio recordings, notes taken during the sessions, printed transcripts of the recordings with marginalia, and a reflexive journal. The interviews, which took place online through Zoom, a cloud-based video conferencing site, were recorded and saved on a password-protected computer and also on a media storage device. The audio transcript function was enabled to produce automated transcripts of the interview sessions. To ensure that no details were omitted, these initial transcripts, which were downloaded and saved, were cross-checked and edited by comparing them to the audio recordings and the notes made during the interview. This process resulted in accurate, literal transcriptions, including "aspects of nonverbal communication such as pauses, laughter, interruptions, changes in vocal tone or emotion, and places where the tape is inaudible or not understandable" (Lodico et al., 2010, p. 187). Before the coding process began, participants



were given the opportunity to review the edited transcriptions to ensure no alterations were needed; then the printed transcripts of the interviews were numbered, and the participants' names were removed and replaced with pseudonyms.

Since the themes of the existing literature were utilized in the construction of the research and interview questions, *a priori* coding, also known as deductive coding, was employed to analyze the transcripts. Transcriptions were coded to identify the patterns that related to the thematic influential factors in choosing a major and to note the recurrence of these factors among the participants. In addition, emergent coding, also referred to as inductive coding, was applied to any statements which could not be connected to the underlying themes of economic influence, interpersonal influence, intrinsic interest, and college curricular content and pedagogy. Creswell (2013) observed that *a priori* coding is limiting and thus urges researchers "to be open to additional codes emerging during analysis" (p. 185). According to Järvensivu and Törnroos (2010), the combination of deductive and inductive coding as a research logic is based on the epistemology of interpretivism and centers on exploration and understanding a social phenomenon through the lens of the participants. Thus, in accordance with this tenet, the combining of *a priori* and emergent coding was an ideal approach for this case study.

Because the purpose of a case study investigation is to add depth to the understanding of the why and the how of the phenomenon (Yin 2009), which in this study is the decline in foreign language majors, the data analysis focused on why and how students determine their major. To ensure the 'why' and 'how' apprehension of this research, data gathered through the interview questions were analyzed and aligned with the research questions.

The table below shows the research questions and the corresponding interview questions which provided the data for analysis.

**Table 1***Research Questions and Corresponding Interview Questions*

Research questions	Corresponding interview questions	Interview sub-questions
<p>Research Question 1 What factors influence students to choose a foreign language major?</p>	<p>What factors influenced you in choosing your major?</p> <p>Can you tell me about the career path you will most likely pursue?</p> <p>Do you have any thoughts you would like to add before we conclude the interview?</p>	<p>What factors influenced you in choosing your major?</p> <p>Peer influence?</p> <p>Family influence?</p> <p>University personnel?</p> <p>K-12 personnel?</p> <p>Intrinsic interest/passion?</p> <p>Economic considerations?</p>
<p>Research Question 2 What factors influence students to choose majors other than a foreign language?</p>	<p>What factors influenced you in choosing your major?</p> <p>Can you tell me about the career path you will most likely pursue?</p> <p>Do you have any thoughts you would like to add before we conclude the interview?</p>	<p>What factors influenced you in choosing your major?</p> <p>Peer influence?</p> <p>Family influence?</p> <p>University personnel?</p> <p>K-12 personnel?</p> <p>Intrinsic interest/passion?</p> <p>Economic considerations?</p>
<p>Research Question 3 Are there differences and similarities in the factors influencing major choice identified by students majoring in a foreign language and those not majoring in a foreign language?</p>	<p>What factors influenced you in choosing your major?</p> <p>Can you tell me about the career path you will most likely pursue?</p> <p>Do you have any thoughts you would like to add before we conclude the interview?</p>	<p>What factors influenced you in choosing your major?</p> <p>Peer influence?</p> <p>Family influence?</p> <p>University personnel?</p> <p>K-12 personnel?</p> <p>Intrinsic interest/passion?</p> <p>Economic considerations?</p>
<p>Research Question 4 What initiatives do students suggest as ways to strengthen the foreign language program?</p>	<p>What ideas can you suggest for strengthening the foreign language program?</p> <p>Do you have any thoughts you would like to add before we</p>	

---

conclude the interview?

---

Due to the nature of this study, discrepant data were not anticipated, and no discrepant points were uncovered. The research questions were aimed at a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being studied, and the interview questions were designed to generate subjective responses that would vary among the participants. There were no right or wrong answers to the questions. The variables which the literature cites as key factors in major choice were used to inform this study and generate responses to the interview questions. Although comparisons were drawn between the key factors cited in the literature, the key factors cited by participants majoring in foreign language, and the key factors cited by participants majoring in fields other than foreign language; the purpose of these comparisons was not to prove a prediction or determine statistical significance. Because no hypothesis was generated as part of this case study, no expectations existed regarding the outcome of the data. Additionally, because no statistical analyses were performed on the data collected during the interviews, the possibility of discrepant cases was diminished. Lastly, to reduce the likelihood of discrepancies, the data collection methods and analysis were confirmed to correspond with the study design.

The analysis of the data entailed coding using a four-step strategy. The first step in the process was the preparatory phase which involved persistent listening to the audio recordings, repeated reading of the notes taken during the interviews, and intensive scrutiny of the edited transcripts. Additionally, during this initial phase, marginalia were employed to facilitate searching the transcripts for descriptive patterns and categories projected to emerge from this intensive reading. According to Creswell (2013), this first step is to acquire a general sense of the information and an overall impression of the “depth, credibility, and use of the information” (p. 185).

The second step of the strategy was the exploratory phase of the analysis in which the actual process of coding began. In this study, the coding was primarily *a priori*, arising from the

interview questions which were based on the theoretical framework and the body of literature on major choice. Coding was also emergent in keeping with the recommendation to remain open to the emergence of additional codes when working with *a priori* coding (Creswell, 2013). This blended coding ensured a holistic analysis. A line-by-line assessment accompanied by color coding of the transcript was employed to root out the main ideas. The key codes were transformed into concepts based on similarities and differences, and the codes indicating items of less significance were subsumed under the key codes.

The third step of the process was the specification phase which employed connective analysis strategies. During this phase, the correlations between concepts were analyzed to develop categories that related the concepts to the central questions of the study. These categories were labeled frequently with a word or phrase “based in the actual language of the participant” (Creswell, 2013, p. 186). Themes were developed from these categories and an understanding of the literature. According to Creswell (2013), these themes represent unified segments of information composed of several codes that create a common idea.

The fourth step in the analysis of the data was integration. The various themes that emerged were compared and integrated to demonstrate how the analysis aligned with the research questions. Results of the data analysis, integrating the interview questions and the research questions, are discussed in Chapter 4 to ensure adequate explanation of the findings and to provide the response to the central questions: What factors influence students to choose a foreign language major? What factors influence students to choose majors other than a foreign language? Are there differences and similarities in the factors influencing major choice identified by students majoring in a foreign language and those not majoring in a foreign language? What initiatives do students suggest as ways to strengthen the foreign language program?

### **Validity**

This case study operates within the interpretivist paradigm, which is founded on the belief that reality and knowledge are socially constructed, negotiated, and fluid. Consequently, no objective truth or validity exists; rather, validity must be constructed. For that reason, the study represents “research that probes for deeper understanding rather than examining surface features” (Johnson, 1995, p.4) in order to build trustworthiness and establish confidence in the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Constructivism, the theoretical framework for this case study, values multiple realities; thus, to acquire valid realities, data were collected via interviews, which reflected the participants’ subjective experiences and diverse ways of knowing. To add to the subjective experiences and develop what Patton refers to as a comprehensive understanding of phenomena (1999), archival records and the review of literature were utilized.

In qualitative research, validity is partially constructed through the investigator’s commitment to explain the rights and the role of the participants as well as the role of the researcher (Bravo-Moreno, 2003). In this study, the rights of the participants and the objective role of the researcher were explained in the consent forms and repeated at the time of the interviews. Specifically, participants were reminded that their participation was voluntary, they had the right to anonymity, they had the right to leave the study at any time with no negative consequences, and they had the right to confidentiality assured through the careful storage of the data. The objective role of the researcher was revisited by reminding the participants that the information from the interview was solely for the purpose of case study, would not be shared with others, would not affect their grade in any class, and would not impact any future relationship with the foreign language program or the university as a whole. The role of the participants in this case study was to “use their own words to draw on their own concepts and experiences” (Orlikowski & Baroudi, 1991). With this objective in mind, the participants were encouraged to speak openly, were afforded time to elaborate on their answers, and were assured there were no right or wrong responses. The participants fulfilled their role using their

own words to relate their subjective experiences and beliefs and provide information on the how and the why regarding their choice of major.

The design of the study itself added validity. In this case study design, dealing with the decline in foreign language majors, the research questions were valid because they were based on recurring themes in the preponderance of literature on major choice. They were well-founded and actionable and thus demonstrated validity. The data collection method for this research also added validity to the study. Through interviews, the participants were encouraged to elaborate on their choice of major. According to Creswell (2013), the interview is the logical collection instrument because the intent of the analysis will be accomplished as the participants elaborate on open-ended questions. To add further validity to the collection method, notes were taken during each interview and then reviewed in order to refine and make changes to the approach as necessary prior to the subsequent interviews. According to Merriam (2009), this practice “is an interactive process throughout that allows the investigator to produce believable and trustworthy findings” (p. 165).

The consistency of the data analysis also added validity to the study. The process of analysis began with repeated listening to the audio recordings from the zoom interview sessions and simultaneous reading of the automated transcripts. This step was followed by editing the transcripts to produce a verbatim transcription. According to Merriam (2009), “verbatim transcription of recorded interviews provides the best database for analysis” (p. 110).

Triangulation, which involved gathering and analyzing data from different sources, also added validity to the research. Specifically, triangulation was provided through the review of literature, archival documents, and participant interviews. Because the data from these different sources substantiated each other, the themes which evolved and the conclusions which were drawn added validity to the study (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015; Yin, 2009).

Other techniques that add validity to qualitative research include pilot testing, peer review, and member checking (Merriam 2009), as well as audit trails (Creswell, 2013). In order to pre-test the interview and determine the feasibility of the open-ended questions, the study was piloted with a foreign language faculty member at the research site. Peer review was employed by discussing the study and interview questions with several colleagues and researchers prior to conducting student interviews. Through such means, valuable feedback was obtained, and validity was added. Validity was also ensured through the examination of the study by the USI dissertation committee.

Two additional safeguards increased the validity of the research. First, member checking augmented the study's validity since participants were allowed to review the audio recording transcriptions for accuracy. Secondly, an audit trail was established. Consent forms, interview notes, journals, calendars, audio recordings, and transcription drafts were locked in a file cabinet to be secured for a maximum of three years before being destroyed. Securing the data for review during this time period added validity to the study.

Finally, a fundamental goal of qualitative research, and one which relates to validity, is the trustworthiness of a study. An awareness of researcher positionality is crucial if trustworthiness is to be achieved. Thus, as an "insider" in this study, I practiced reflexivity by acknowledging and monitoring personal positions that had the potential to influence the research. To identify and mitigate researcher bias, I maintained a continuous inner dialogue to challenge preconceived ideas and assumptions. Additionally, I used a reflexive journal to record and examine any feelings of uncertainty, emotions, and assumptions that arose throughout the study. According to Dwyer and Buckle (2009), the emic perspective accompanied by reflexivity serves to augment research. Thus, reflexivity added validity to this study.

In summary, some researchers decry a single case study as steeped in subjectivity and lacking methodological precision and external validity. For example, Maoz (2002) states, "the

use of the case study absolves the author from any kind of methodological considerations. Case studies have become in many cases a synonym for freeform research where anything goes” (pp. 164-165). Not all researchers agree with this criticism but rather proclaim the validity of the case study approach and emphasize the quality criteria of single case studies as alternatives to the criteria used in the acclaimed scientific method (Gerring, 2006; Levy, 2008; Tsoukas, 1989). In this case study, construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability were realized. Concisely, construct validity was maintained through the selection of interviews as the most appropriate measurement tool for the conceptual framework; internal validity was maintained by the use of triangulation; external validity resulted due to the research design encouraging transferability; and reliability was ensured due to the sound methodological procedures allowing the study to be repeated with the same results.

### **Assumptions**

Consistent with Wolgemuth et al. (2017), it is assumed that the research synthesis, resulting from the combination of studies whose theoretical frameworks are similar enough to merit comparison to the variables in this investigation, was understood and applied correctly in this study. Thus, it is assumed that results from this case study can lead to a better understanding of the choice of major process and its application to the choice of foreign language as a major. It is assumed that the findings from this study will be used to address the decline in foreign language majors at a small, private, Midwestern university. According to Merriam (2009), interviewing is a valid method for conducting educational research that can add to the knowledge base for practitioners in the field. Thus, it is assumed that insights emerging from these interviews are transferable and can be used to inform strategies and policies aimed at reversing the decline in foreign language majors at other comparable universities.

It is also assumed that the sampling method was appropriate for this case study. By soliciting interviews from all the foreign language majors, the purposeful sampling strategy



fulfilled the objective “to identify and select all cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance” (Palinkas et al., 2015. p. 535), which in this study was the identification of the factors that influence students to choose a foreign language major. The FL 112 students, representing those who had experience with foreign language study but had chosen to major in a subject other than a foreign language, also comprised a purposeful sampling. Because FL 112 is required for all university students who cannot demonstrate proficiency in a world language equivalent to the completion of this beginning-level course, participants in this group were considered “typical” members of the phenomenon (Palinkas et al., 2015), which in this study was the decline of foreign language majors at a small, private, Midwestern university. Thus, it is assumed that purposeful sampling was appropriate for the study.

Additionally, it is assumed that the number of students chosen to participate in this study was appropriate. Guest, Bruce, and Johnson (2006) suggested that each interview group have approximately 12 participants. According to Crouch and McKenzie (2006), the total number of interview participants should not exceed 20. This investigation fulfilled these expectations with a total of 10 participants in each group.

Regarding validity, as pertains to the veracity of the responses, it is assumed that the participants were not deceptive in their remarks. Although it is possible that some participants may exaggerate or diminish their replies to interview questions (Gosling et al., 1998), it is assumed that the participants in this case study were truthful in their responses to the best of their ability.

With regard to data collection and analysis, Bravo-Moreno (2003) asserts the importance of clarity to distinguish the voice of the participants from the voice of the researcher. It is assumed that such clarity was maintained for the whole of this study through the ongoing practice of researcher reflexivity. Moreover, it is assumed that every attempt was made to pose the interview questions in an unbiased and objective manner (Jootun, McGhee, & Marland,

2009). Furthermore, for this study to be recreated by other practitioners, it is assumed that data collection was replicated in precisely the same way with each participant (Yin, 2009). Lastly, it is assumed that “constant comparative analysis” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) characterized the data analysis process.

### **Limitations**

Qualitative studies, in general, describe events and situations which to a degree are context specific and limit generalizations (Spencer et al., 2003). Thus, generalization of the findings of this study to other students at other institutions of higher learning is not achievable. However, transferability of the findings from this specific context to another similar context is possible. Because this study took place at a small, private, Midwestern university, transferability, also referred to as confirmability, is mainly limited to American universities of approximately the same size.

### **Delimitations**

The body of literature does not focus on factors influencing foreign language as a major choice; rather, the variables discussed in the majority of studies refer to influential factors related to major choice in general. This study concentrated on major choice as it affects foreign language study. Additionally, this case study, by definition “a spatially bounded phenomenon” (Gerring, 2004, p. 342), focused on a single university and the decline in foreign language majors at that research site. Although multiple-case studies allow for a more comprehensive exploration of research questions and may provide stronger evidence, qualitative researchers, typically, are hesitant to generalize from one case to another because the contextual conditions of cases vary (Creswell, 1998). In keeping with Creswell’s perspective, this study did not compare or investigate any other foreign language programs or interview any students outside this small, private, Midwestern university.

### **Summary**

In this single case study, a qualitative methodology was used to investigate the decline in foreign language majors at a small, private, Midwestern university by identifying factors influencing the choice of college majors and exploring initiatives to strengthen the foreign language program. By focusing on major choice as it affects the study of world languages, this research addressed the gap in the literature that exists in relating the choice of major in general to the choice of foreign language as a major. Triangulation was achieved using participant interviews, archival documents, and the body of literature. Specifically, to investigate the phenomenon, semi-structured interviews of students who had declared foreign language majors and students in elementary-level foreign language classes who had declared majors other than foreign language were audio recorded, transcribed, and then coded, allowing for the emergence of patterns, categories, and themes. Relevant portions of the data were synthesized and aligned with the research questions to compare the differences and similarities in the factors influencing major choice identified by those who chose foreign language as a major and those who chose other fields of study. Additionally, the data analysis provided suggestions to enhance the foreign language program at this small, private, Midwestern university.

#### **Chapter 4: Findings**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the decline in foreign language majors at a small, private, Midwestern university by identifying factors influencing the choice of college majors and exploring initiatives to strengthen the foreign language program. To determine factors specifically influencing the choice of foreign language as a major, the four key themes cited in the preponderance of literature as influential in the selection of a college major

were used as the starting point and foundation for this study. The four key factors include interpersonal relationships; intrinsic interest or motivation; college curriculum and pedagogy; and economic outcomes.

This chapter presents a description of the participants, categorized as those majoring in a foreign language and those majoring in a field other than foreign language, followed by a synthesis and comparison of the interview responses from the two groups of participants. The responses to the interview questions are aligned to the following research questions:

1. What factors influence students to choose a foreign language major?
2. What factors influence students to choose majors other than a foreign language?
3. Are there differences and similarities in the factors influencing major choice identified by students majoring in a foreign language and those not majoring in a foreign language?
4. What initiatives do students suggest as ways to strengthen the foreign language program?

The semi-structured interview was implemented as the most appropriate data collection technique to investigate the decline in foreign language majors because it offered the greatest possibility for a rich description and exposition of meaning with a focus on the individual(s) (Lodico et al., 2010). The analysis of the data involved assigning codes and looking for recurring patterns. The findings of the study, which according to Merriam “*are these recurring patterns or themes*” (2009, p. 23), are presented as the results. A summary restating the essential information discussed in this chapter follows the results.

### **Descriptive Findings**

The theoretical framework for this study is the student choice construct which implies self-efficacy by asserting that students successively make choices in situational contexts. In keeping with this theory, the goal of the study was to describe individual students and gain

insight into their values, personal narratives, and sociocultural experiences which, in turn, affected the choices they made regarding their college major. In the following sections, the sample population, including size and characteristics, is described.

### **Sample Size**

The target population for this study consisted of two groups of students: those students who had declared a major in a foreign language and an equal number of students concurrently enrolled in elementary-level foreign language classes who had declared a major other than a foreign language. The sampling method for both groups was purposeful since it was based on a predetermined criterion (Palinkas et al., 2015). Invitations to participate in the study were emailed to the 13 foreign language majors and to all the students in the second of two entry-level foreign language courses, designated as FL 112, who had chosen a major other than a foreign language. The invitation email explained the purpose of the study and the interview procedure as well as the time commitment and the date by which students had to confirm their desire to participate. Additionally, the emails sent to the students enrolled in the FL 112 classes explained that the total number of participants selected for the study could not exceed 13 and that selection would be based on the order in which affirmative responses were received. Since 10 of the 13 foreign language majors volunteered for the interview (a response rate of more than 76%), no follow-up emails were necessary. The first 10 students among those majoring in a subject other than foreign language who affirmed a desire to participate in the study were notified of their acceptance. Thus, the sample totaled 20 participants, the number not to be exceeded in a case study (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006).

### **Participant Characteristics**

Of the 20 students interviewed 15 identified as female and five as male. Nineteen of the students were between the ages of 18-24, and one was over 30 years old. One student identified as Latina while the others identified as White. The majority of the participants were

from Indiana, followed by Missouri, and then an equal number from Kentucky, Ohio, and Wisconsin. To maintain confidentiality, each participant received a pseudonym. A brief profile of each participant at the time of the interview follows with students divided into two groups, those who had chosen a foreign language major and those enrolled in FL 112 who had selected majors other than foreign language. The order of the participants within each group is random.

### ***Foreign Language Majors***

Louise is a freshman planning to graduate in four years. Her major is Spanish, which she began studying as a freshman in high school. Before deciding to concentrate on Spanish, she had studied German for two years in middle school. She reported that she is good at languages but wasn't connecting with German. She entered the university's foreign language program at the 300-level.

Bettye is a senior who has studied at the university for four years but must complete one more year to graduate. Her major is Spanish, which she began studying as a freshman in high school. She had not studied another language before entering the university. She began Spanish at the 100 level.

Dennis is a senior who will graduate within a matter of weeks after four years at the university. His major is Spanish which he began in ninth grade. During his four years in high school, he also studied Mandarin Chinese. Upon entering the university at the 300-level in Spanish, Dennis decided to add a minor in Russian Studies.

Elizabeth is a freshman who anticipates graduating in four years or perhaps in three. Although she became interested in the Spanish language in middle school, no classes were available until high school. She studied Spanish throughout high school and entered the university at the 200 level.

Jeannie is classified as a second-degree student at the university. She already earned a BS in broadcasting and a minor in French from this university several years ago.

She decided to return to college for a BA with a major in French and plans to graduate in 2022. She studied Spanish for three years in high school but was not happy with her college placement test score and decided to switch to French when she first entered the university for her BS. When she returned to pursue her BA, she began French at the 300 level.

Ruth is a freshman who anticipates graduating in four years. She reported that she was introduced to Spanish in elementary school but that it was in middle and high school where she began learning to write and speak the language. Spanish is the only language that she has studied thus far. Ruth started her university studies in Spanish at the 300 level.

Dean has been a student at this small, private, Midwestern university for four years and plans to graduate after one additional semester. He had originally started to pursue a BS in Spanish education but changed his major to Spanish and is now seeking a BA degree. Dean has studied Spanish every year since kindergarten, although not in an immersion setting. He also reported studying German and Klingon. Dean explained that Klingon, the constructed language of an alien race in the fictional Star Trek universe, is considered a full-fledged language that is now taught at some schools around the world. Dean started his major in Spanish at the 300 level.

Alice is a junior planning to graduate in one more year. She has a double major in French Education and TESL. She began her study of French as a freshman in high school where foreign language for a period of three years was required. Alice decided to take an additional fourth year of high school French. She also studied German online. Alice entered the university at the 200 level in French.

Mary is a freshman who anticipates graduating in three years. She is pursuing a BS with a major in Spanish Education. She took five years of Latin in elementary and middle school and began studying Spanish in eighth grade. Mary reported that immediately she fell

in love with the language and knew that she wanted to continue studying Spanish. She entered the university language program at the 300 level.

Bev is not a typical undergraduate student since she already earned a BS in civil engineering with a minor in Spanish from this university. She returned in the fall after graduating in the spring to pursue a major in Spanish. As a second-degree student, she plans to receive her BA by the summer of next year. Bev began studying Spanish at age 12 in middle school. She did not study another world language until this year when she began German. When Bev previously entered the university as a freshman pursuing a BS, she placed at the 300 level in Spanish, and she has continued as a BA student from there.

### ***Students Majoring in Fields other than Foreign Language***

Joanne is a sophomore who plans to graduate on schedule in three more years. She is majoring in communications. Joanne developed this interest when, as a senior in high school studying advanced speech, she heard and was touched by Robert Kennedy's speech announcing Martin Luther King's death. She studied Spanish, French, and Japanese in middle school and then took four years of Spanish in high school. She placed into the 100 level on the university's Spanish proficiency test.

Justine is a sophomore who plans to graduate in three more years. She is a pre-medical student majoring in neuroscience. She reported being interested in the medical field since her freshman year in high school and in neuroscience in particular since her junior year when her uncle suffered a traumatic brain injury and made a full recovery because of his neuroscience team. Justine studied Spanish for three years in high school and entered the university at the 100 level.

Frank, a sophomore, plans to graduate in three years with a major in global business. He had no idea what to study when he arrived on campus but picked up some



pamphlets on global business and reported that what he saw looked interesting to him. Frank studied Spanish from seventh grade through graduation from high school and entered the university at the 100 level.

Sharon is a junior who will graduate next spring. Her major is psychology. She decided to major in the subject as a college freshman. She studied Spanish for two years in high school and learned some Danish on her own. Although she is second-generation Latina, she has Danish ancestors on her mother's side of the family and thus wanted to explore that language. She took the university's Spanish proficiency test and placed at the 100 level.

Bill is a freshman who anticipates graduating in four years. His love of numbers as a result of his high school's math program resulted in his selection of a double major combining computer science with statistics and data science. Bill reported having studied Spanish since first grade. He tested into 100 level Spanish.

Nancy is a junior planning to graduate after one more semester, in three and a half years. She had no particular field of study in mind upon enrolling in the university but eventually decided on business. She first declared a global business major but changed to a major in finance this year. She studied Spanish starting in kindergarten through eighth grade. In high school she studied Latin. She resumed Spanish when she placed into 100 level Spanish at the university.

Jim is a sophomore who is unsure of his future plans and may not continue his studies at this university. He is a history major who reported being interested in history for as long as he can remember. He has enjoyed his history classes throughout all levels of his schooling. Jim studied French in middle school and as a freshman in high school. He decided to try Spanish as a college freshman and was placed at the 100 level.

Kathy is a freshman who anticipates graduating in four years. She is majoring in

athletic training as a gateway into physical therapy. She reported that her interest in athletic training and physical therapy was spurred on by her love of sports and successive injuries that kept her from participating. She studied Spanish for three and a half years in high school and placed at the 100 level upon entering the university.

Linda is a freshman anticipating graduation in four years. Her major is civil engineering. She began engineering classes in seventh grade and continued through high school. Linda reported that at her middle school the students rotated through all the languages during seventh grade. In her high school, students had to choose regarding what track to pursue. Linda chose between a focus on foreign language or engineering. She decided to pursue engineering but did manage to take three years of Spanish in high school. She placed at the 100 level in Spanish on the university's proficiency test.

Suzanne is a sophomore who plans to graduate in another two years. She is a pre-medical student majoring in biology. Her determination to enter the medical field began when she was in seventh grade and her mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. Her interest grew as she researched, continued studying, and attended a school-sponsored medical summer camp. She studied Spanish beginning in second grade, continued with three years of high school Spanish, and placed at the 100 level on the university's placement test.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

The data in this case study were analyzed using a thematic strategy based primarily on a deductive approach. Data from the interviews included audio recordings, handwritten notes made during the interview sessions, and transcripts of the recordings which were cross-checked and edited by comparing them to the audio recordings. Data also included marginalia and a reflexive journal with personal thoughts, emotions, opinions, evolving perceptions, and decision points, which, according to Dwyer and

Buckel (2009), the researcher must maintain and include as part of the analysis to examine positionality. The interview participants were allowed to review the edited transcriptions of their interviews, and no alterations were necessary.

Because the themes of the existing literature were employed in the formulation of the research and interview questions, deductive coding, known also as *a priori* coding, was used in the analysis of the transcripts. Transcriptions were coded to identify patterns relating to the thematic variables in major choice and to note the recurrence of these influential factors among the participants. Additionally, inductive coding, also known as emergent coding, was applied to any findings which could not be related to the overarching *a priori* themes of interpersonal influence, intrinsic interest, college curriculum and pedagogy, and economic influence as factors in choosing a major. According to Järvensivu and Törnroos (2010), this combination of coding aligns with the interpretivist paradigm and is a logical technique for exploring and understanding subjective experiences.

The purpose of a case study analysis is to add profundity to understanding the why and the how of the phenomenon (Yin 2009), which in this study was the decline in foreign language majors at a small, private, Midwestern university. To address this decline by achieving an understanding of why and how students choose their majors and how to strengthen the foreign language program, data gathered via the interview questions were aligned to the research questions and analyzed.

The analysis of the data involved a four-step approach. The first step was the introductory phase which entailed persistent listening to the audio recordings while re-reading the notes taken during the interviews, annotating the printed transcripts with marginalia, and scrutinizing the edited transcripts.

The second step was the exploratory phase of the analysis which commenced the actual process of coding. Through a line-by-line assessment, color coding was applied to distinguish the main ideas. Codes indicating items of less significance were assimilated under the key codes. The key codes were transformed into concepts based on similarities and differences. The process of coding was essentially *a priori*, arising from the interview questions based on the theoretical framework and the preponderance of the literature on major choice. However, common occurrences throughout the data resulted in emergent coding as well, thus ensuring what Creswell (2013) refers to as a holistic analysis.

The third step in the process was specification using connective analysis strategies. During this phase, the connections between concepts were analyzed in order to develop categories “within a context into a coherent whole” (Maxwell, 2005), thus relating the concepts to the central questions of the study. These categories were labeled often using quotes to capture the “actual language of the participant” (Creswell, 2013, p. 186). From these categories and an understanding of the literature on major choice, the *a priori* themes were advanced and emerging themes were developed.

The final step of the analysis was the integration phase. With the coding process completed, the themes and subthemes were compared, and the data were integrated. The results demonstrated how the analysis aligned to and answered the research questions. Details of the analysis and the results follow.

## **Results**

### ***Responses to Interview Question 1***

To begin the exploratory phase of the analysis, the responses to the ice-breaker question (Appendix A) were coded. This question invited participants to discuss when they first started studying their major or first became interested in their major. Of the 10 participants

majoring in a subject other than a foreign language, one determined their major in elementary school, two decided on their majors in middle school, three decided on their majors while in high school, and four decided on a major after entering the university. Of the foreign language majors, two became interested in learning languages in elementary school, by middle school three had determined their major, an additional four decided on a foreign language major while in high school, and one finalized the decision to declare a major, as opposed to a minor, after enrolling in college.

The discussion surrounding the choice of college major at these early stages of the education process which began with the ice-breaker question continued during the first interview question *What influenced you in choosing your major?* During the specification phase of coding, the connections between concepts were analyzed as the participants talked about their previous educational experiences. This analysis led to the development of categories relating the concepts to the central question of influential factors in the choice of a college major.

**Table 2**

*Emerging Categories Influential in Major Choice with Representative Quotes*

Categories	Participant quotes
Career education programs	<p>Justine: "In my senior year, we did different rotations in the hospital. We shadowed...there is one [class] that helped you get your CAN certification and then there was a fire and rescue one. There was [another class] that had people actually in preschool and elementary schools around the community... shadowing teachers and helping out in the classroom." (Now majoring in neuroscience for pre-med).</p> <p>Linda: "I was in seventh grade [when] I [first] took engineering. And then I had to choose between Spanish and engineering, and I chose engineering" (as her high school track). (Now majoring in civil engineering).</p>

Summer camps	<p>Suzanne: “I got real interested in the anatomy of the body... and I went to medical camp over the summer... and fell in love with surgery.” (Now majoring in biology for pre-med).</p> <p>Elizabeth: “I got interested in biology... in middle school... I attended summer camp for three weeks at a college... it was super fun.” (Now pursuing a biology major in addition to her Spanish major).</p>
Community programs	<p>Joanne: “The experiences were “really awesome... Veterans Day program was a really great thing.” (Discussing programs presented for the school and community as part of her advanced speech class. Now majoring in communications.)</p> <p>Mary: “I went ahead and shadowed last year in a bilingual classroom for kindergarten... just reading books to kids five years old, asking them questions, interacting with them in the classroom. It was an amazing experience.” (Discussing community-based learning. Now majoring in Spanish education.)</p>
School trips abroad	<p>Alice: “I was able to go on that trip and ever since that trip and being in France, it really inspired me to continue my language learning and to continue on with French.” (Discussing a school-sponsored trip for high schoolers led by her French teacher. Now majoring in French education).</p> <p>Bev: “I have a host family there [Spain] that I don’t want to lose the ability to communicate with, and you know, if you don’t use it, you lose it, so I feel like that was definitely a bit motivator for me as well.” (Discussing summer study abroad after junior year in high school. Now majoring in Spanish.)</p>

---

Based on quotes from the participants and the labeled categories, a new theme not discussed in the review of literature emerged as a key variable in the decision-making process leading to the choice of major. This emergent theme was titled *middle and high school programs*.

Besides producing a new theme, the first interview question *What influenced you in choosing your major?* resulted in the following responses to the sub-questions, which are based on the *a priori* themes garnered from the review of literature.

**Response to Interview Sub-question a.** *Can you talk about peer influence as a factor in choosing your major?* examined the *a priori* theme of interpersonal relationships discussed in the literature. For the 10 students majoring in a foreign language, peer influence had not been influential in their choice, although one participant commented that having high school peers involved in foreign language made it more fun, and another commented that her peers affirmed the decision that she had already made.

Results of the analysis were very similar for the students majoring in other fields. Nine reported that peer influence was not a factor in their decision, while one of these nine said that peers' opinions were important but that her decision had already been made. One student in this group of ten participants reported that peer influence was a factor in her decision-making process and elaborated saying that a student ambassador whom she met while touring the university convinced her to follow through with the choice of major she had been contemplating.

**Responses to Interview Sub-question b.** *Can you talk about the influence of family in your choice of major?* also explored the *a priori* theme of interpersonal relationships and was the only sub-question to generate a unanimous response. None of the students, whether majoring in foreign language or majoring in other subjects, related their degree choice to the influence of a family member. Louise, a foreign language major, volunteered that her family was supportive of her choice and thought it was a good idea. Bettye volunteered that her family was surprised by her choice to major in Spanish but did not react negatively to it.

Of the 10 students majoring in subjects other than foreign language who reported no family influence in their decision, nine added that their family would have nurtured any choice

they made. Of these students, six used the word “supportive” to describe their parents’ mindset regarding their educational decisions and careers, two reported that their parents always offer encouragement, and one student volunteered that her parents push her to achieve in whatever she chooses. Suzanne reported, “My parents thought I was crazy... they’re like you want to cut people open?” However, they did not try to influence her major choice or goal of becoming a surgeon. Rather, according to Suzanne, “They’re always supportive of everything that I do.”

Although no family member directly influenced the choice of major for any of these students, love of family played a role in the autonomous decisions made by some of the students. The two students whose passion is to become physicians reported that their decision to choose pre-med majors was the result of health crises within their families. And the student whose passion is to help people with their problems reported the mental health issues of a sibling as one of the factors in her decision to pursue a major in psychology.

**Response to Interview Sub-question c.** *Can you talk about the influence of university personnel, such as admission counselors, academic advisors, and professors, as factors in choosing your major?* further explored the *a priori* theme of interpersonal relationships. All the foreign language majors stated they had made their degree choice before enrolling in the university, and thus, university personnel had no influence on their decision. Nonetheless, Ruth, who was still not absolutely sure that she wanted to pursue a Spanish major, as opposed to a Spanish minor, commented that speaking with her advisor confirmed her choice to major. Several of the other foreign language majors commented positively on their advisors and professors, citing the help they had received securing internships and the encouragement that flowed as they progressed through their major; however, they maintained that their decision to major had been made before enrolling at the university.

Within the group of students majoring in a field other than foreign language, two students cited professors and two students cited academic advisors as influential in their decision to



major. None of the students cited admission counselors as an influential factor in their choice. Sharon credited a professor her freshman year as influential in her decision to major in psychology, and Justine credited a professor with sealing her decision to major in neuroscience at this particular university. Frank explained that an academic advisor had helped him decide to try global business as a major, and Bill, speaking of his advisor, commented that he unequivocally influenced his choice to add a statistics and data science major to his computer science major.

**Responses to Interview Sub-question d.** *Can you talk about the influence of grade school teachers, middle school teachers, high school teachers, or high school counselors in choosing your major?* additionally addressed the *a priori* theme of interpersonal relationships. This subject elicited a nearly unanimous response from the foreign language majors with all but one reporting that their enjoyment of foreign language and, to some degree, their decision to major in the language could be attributed to their high school or middle school teachers. Louise reported that her encouraging high school Spanish teacher, who consistently worked to help her improve, was key to her continuing with foreign language study. Bettye reported that in high school she had “two awesome teachers who love the language and love teaching language.” She recalled the teachers as being fun, which, in her words, made her “really love learning Spanish.” Alice volunteered that her high school French teacher inspired her to follow in her footsteps and major in French education. Mary did not have a good experience with her high school teacher for three years but credits her middle school teacher as instrumental in the love of Spanish she developed and retained. She reported that this teacher, whose pedagogical approach included role-playing games, oral presentations, vocabulary games, culture days, and pages of translation, was both creative and rigorous. Dennis, the one foreign language major who did not attribute any influence in his choice of a Spanish major to former teachers, saw his entire reason for learning languages as coming from autonomous motivation.

Of the 10 participants who had chosen majors other than foreign language, five reported their degree choice had been influenced by their former teachers. Jim reported that his history teachers, starting in elementary school and continuing through high school, made learning interesting and fun. Sharon, explaining that her high school English teacher served unofficially as her counselor, specified, "We had deep discussions about different fields to go into for college." This teacher encouraged her to act on her interest in helping others with their problems by majoring in psychology.

Although three additional students, among the participants majoring in fields other than foreign language, acknowledged the influence of their middle and high school teachers, they couched their discussion of the instructors within the larger context of their schools' academic programs. For example, as Bill extolled his high school calculus teacher, he emphasized the high school's math program that offers very rigorous calculus studies. As Joanne characterized her high school communications teacher as a challenging instructor who encouraged students to get outside of their comfort zones, she focused on the school's program which emphasized student participation in school and community activities. Joanne commended these community experiences saying that they allowed students to use their talents to be effective community members. Linda, while extolling both her middle and high school teachers as influential in her decision to major in civil engineering, underscored the school district's technology program which she entered as a seventh grader and continued through high school.

The five students who did not feel their K-12 teachers had any influence in their degree choice are majoring in global business, finance, athletic training, neuroscience, and biology. Only the latter two, both of whom are planning careers in medicine, expounded on influential factors from their high school days and mentioned their teachers in passing. When Justine was asked to comment on former teachers as potentially influential in her choice of major, she began instead to explain the school's career education program that had a profound influence on her

degree choice. She described her career tech education class that included different rotations in the hospital and neuroscience topics in the classroom setting. Justine mentioned that her teacher encouraged her in the class, although she did not cite him as influential in her decision to major in neuroscience; rather, she credited the high school program itself. Suzanne, who had already credited the school-sponsored summer camp she had attended as instrumental in her decision to pursue a career in surgery, ruminated about the influence of a high teacher in her major choice and stated, "My teacher for the majority of my biology classes was very dry, but he did prepare me well." She added that although he prepared her well, he did not influence her decision to major in biology.

As previously stated, during the coding process, the connections between the concepts discussed by the participants regarding their prior educational experiences were analyzed, and categories that led to the new theme of middle and high school programs as influential in major choice were developed. The connections and categories used to develop this new theme are revealed through the above responses of Bill, Joanne, Linda, Justine, and Suzanne as well as through the quotes of an additional four students in Table 2.

**Response to Interview Sub-question e.** *Can you reflect on intrinsic interest/passion as a factor in your choice of major?* yielded a substantial number of affirmative responses. In response to this question, eight of the 10 participants in each group referred to the *a priori* theme of intrinsic interest or passion as paramount in their choice of major. Among the group of foreign language majors, Louise stated, "I really, really, really love language like that's just something that I've always kind of been more attracted to, so I really think that that is the main factor why I chose to continue on in college, too." She added that she wants to be able to help people through her knowledge of the language. Elizabeth reported, "Intrinsic motivation really, really like kicked in after I was able to travel to a Spanish speaking country, to Mexico." She

added, “I think it even goes beyond that because I found that the people were so amazing.” She continued reflecting that this cultural aspect was additional motivation saying that when she spoke Spanish “the people were just super, just super grateful, I think, and just super kind towards me.” She recalled that they were “just very thrilled and that was just motivating in itself.” Ruth related her passion for Spanish and her desire to communicate with people in more than one language to her passion for helping people as a future healthcare professional. She added that she would like to be a medical missionary.

One of the two foreign language majors who did not refer to intrinsic interest as key in her choice of majors was Jeannie, a second-degree student, who originally obtained a BS in communications but is now working on her BA in French. Instead of talking about a deep-rooted feeling for the language, she spoke in generalities about her love of reading and her life experiences and choices. She commented, “I guess if I had to confess there’s probably just a tiny part of me that wants to know French ‘cause then I would feel superior to people.” Bettye, the other foreign language major that did not include intrinsic interest as influential in choosing her major, spoke of the circumstances surrounding her degree choice. She related that her passion was theater performance but that she was late in applying to the university and auditions for the theater department had ended. Thus, she decided on Spanish as her default major since she had enjoyed learning the language in high school. Bettye noted, however, that even though intrinsic interest did not influence her initial decision to major in the language, Spanish had become an intrinsic interest for her. She commented, “I think majoring in it has made it—definitely has increased my passion for it for sure.” Bettye is planning to apply to the Peace Corps where she will be able to use her Spanish to help others.

Of the eight participants majoring in subjects other than foreign language who spoke of intrinsic interest as the principal factor in their degree choice, five stated their motivation stemmed from a desire to help others. Joanne stated that she has always had a desire to help

people.” She decided, after finding herself in career limbo that she was “pretty passionate about politics.... and figured that would be the best way to help others.” She is presently majoring in communications and plans to go to law school. Justine, a neuroscience major, declared, “I have always been a helper;” she continued that she wants to put her passion into place as a doctor where she can help people with brain injuries the way doctors helped her uncle when he suffered a TBI. Sharon, a psychology major, stated, “I love volunteering...helping people.” She went on to explain that a lot of her friends have personal issues and need someone to talk to, that her sister is suffering from anxiety and depression, and that she wants to help them. Kathy, describing how she chose her major, explained, “I want to do pediatric physical therapy because I’ve always just been wanting to help children and am just really passionate about helping children.” Suzanne’s passion is also a desire to help children. Wanting to learn more about helping people, in the way that doctors had helped her mother overcome breast cancer, Suzanne attended a summer medical camp where she fell in love with surgery and fell in love with working with kids. After graduating with a major in biology, she intends to pursue a career as a pediatric surgeon.

Besides these five students who explained intrinsic motivation, stemming from a desire to help others, as key in their choice of major, three more students majoring in subjects other than foreign language discussed intrinsic motivation as the principal factor in their degree choice. Bill, who spoke of his love for math, sought out jobs and internships in which he used those skills and stated that “compiling all these sort of building blocks... made me want to commit to ...computer science.” Jim recalled that his intrinsic interest in history was lifelong. He stated, “As a kid growing up, I was always interested in war and military stuff... I always kind of thought I wanted to do something in that regard, and so that kind of led me down the history path...” Another participant who declared her choice of major as a lifelong passion was Linda. She recalled finding enjoyment in building things. She specified, “...when I was younger that

was always my thing...I built my mom a birdhouse for Mother's Day... and stuff like that." Her passion continued, and when given the opportunity to select an academic lane to follow in middle school and high school, Linda chose her current major, civil engineering.

One of the two participants, among this group of students majoring in a field other than foreign language, who did not refer to intrinsic interest as key in choosing a major was Frank. In discussing this sub-question and explaining his reason for choosing global business as his major, Frank stated, "I knew I wanted to do something business-related because I didn't really like... I don't like sciences, but I don't know, nothing else really stood out to me." Nancy also talked about her choice of major as a default decision rather than due to intrinsic motivation. She had originally wanted to do something in the field of science but "passed out in a bad class one day" and stated that "after that, I was like business seems safe." She picked global business as her original major but decided she did not like the emphasis on marketing or management. This year, as a junior, she changed her major to finance, and stated that she hopes to attend law school to help with "legal issues... going on at home."

**Response to Interview Sub-question f.** *Can you talk about economic considerations, such as job availability, the chance of advancement, or salary levels, as a factor in choosing your major?* reflects the role of economic wherewithal in the U.S education system. The response of the foreign language majors to this *a priori* theme as a factor in major choice was varied. Three of the foreign language majors disavowed economic consideration in their choice. Dennis and Ruth definitively negated the role of economics in choosing Spanish as their major. Bettye also asserted that economics played no role in her decision although she acknowledged that it could be "an advantage."

The other seven foreign language majors asserted that economic considerations had played a role in their decision-making process to varying degrees. For example, Jeannie felt that it was somewhat of a factor but not a big consideration in her decision to pursue her second

degree, a choice which she attributed to being a word nerd. With regard to economic opportunity, Louise stated that the consideration was a factor, although not a big one. Elizabeth noted that knowing a foreign language could open more doors. Mary expressed that she considered job opportunities but only marginally. Dean also reported marginal consideration of job opportunities when choosing his major but now plans to continue his studies after receiving his BA to become a teacher. Alice gave economic considerations some reflection and decided to major in French education so that she would have a good chance for employment if the numerous other opportunities she had researched did not pan out. On the other hand, Bev, who completed a BS and is now working on her BA, stated that economic wherewithal “was definitely the idea of a second specialization and doing what I’m passionate about.”

The number of negative and positive responses among participants majoring in fields other than foreign language coincided with the responses of the foreign language majors. Again, three students negated the role of economic wherewithal in their choice of majors and seven students acknowledged that economics had played a role in their decision-making process, albeit to different degrees. When asked if economic considerations factored into her decision-making process, Linda, without any hesitation, categorically replied in the negative. Justine explained that passion rather than economic factors determined her choice and added that money, however, would be “an awesome bonus.” Likewise, Suzanne negated the role of economics in choosing her major and continued “the money is really just a plus, an icing on the cake.”

The other seven participants, within this group of students majoring in fields other than foreign language, asserted that economics had played a role in their decision-making process to varying degrees. For example, Joanne, when asked if economic considerations had figured into her choice of major, declared “absolutely.” Frank responded, “For sure. Like you can do anything with a degree like in business.” Bill, who had researched his choice of computer

science coupled with a major in statistics and data science by looking at supply and demand, declared that he had “absolutely” considered the “economic point of view.” Nancy, who also considered the role of economics in choosing business as her major, said it was “some of the influence... definitely... me going into college and not really knowing where I wanted to go long term, so I was like I can get a job in business...” Additionally, her decision to switch her major from global business to finance was influenced by economic issues at home. Jim conveyed that salary was a concern as he pondered what jobs he “would be actually able to get with a history degree.” Sharon stated that she gave future employment some consideration but that “it wasn’t a priority.” Likewise, Kathy expressed that the availability of jobs only figured “partially” into her consideration between two paths that both represented her passion.

The following table compares the interview responses of foreign language majors to the responses of students who did not select a foreign language major with regard to the themes influential in major choice. These thematic factors include the *a priori* themes of interpersonal relationships (peers, family, university personnel, and K-12 teachers), intrinsic motivation or passion, and economic considerations, as well as the emerging theme of middle and high school programs that came to light during the discussions.

**Table 3**

*Number of Participants Reporting Each Factor as Influential in Major Choice*

Interview question 1: Key factors	Majors in FL	Majors in other fields
Peers ( <i>a priori</i> theme, sub-question a)	0	1
Family ( <i>a priori</i> theme, sub-question b)	0	0
University personnel ( <i>a priori</i> theme, sub-question c)	0	4
K-12 teachers/counselors ( <i>a priori</i> theme, sub-question d)	9	5



Intrinsic interest/passion ( <i>a priori</i> theme, sub-question e)	8	8
Economic considerations ( <i>a priori</i> theme, sub-question f)	7	7
Middle and high school programs (emerging theme)	4	5

---

*Note. N=10 for foreign language majors and N=10 for majors in other fields.*

The table below summarizes the first interview question by listing the influential role of the *a priori* and emerging themes in order of their significance based on least cited to most often cited. The table demonstrates the number of foreign language majors citing particular factors as influential in the choice of major (Research Questions 1) and the number of non-foreign language citing particular factors as influential in major choice (Research Question 2). Through the side-by-side comparison, the table illustrates the differences and similarities in the factors influencing major choice identified by each group (Research Question 3).

**Table 4***Influential Factors in Major Choice from Least Cited to Most Cited*

Influential Variable	Majors in FL	Majors in other fields	Total
Family	0	0	0
Peers	0	1	1
University personnel	0	4	4
Middle and high school programs	4	5	9
K-12 Teachers	9	5	14
Economic considerations	7	7	14
Intrinsic interest/passion for subject	8	8	16

The responses to the *a priori* theme of intrinsic interest as influential in major choice resulted in a subtheme. Coding and cluster analysis established that half of the 16 participants who affirmed intrinsic interest as a factor in their major choice revealed a desire to help others as their motivation. These eight included three students majoring in foreign language and five students majoring in other fields. From the strength of the numbers and the breadth of inclusion, a subtheme emerged and was titled *desire to help others*. The development of this subtheme is further discussed in its relationship to the upcoming interview question regarding prospective career paths.

### ***Responses to Interview Question 2***

The response to *Can you tell me about the career path you will most likely pursue?* produced clear-cut as well speculative results. Of the 10 foreign language majors, eight were relatively sure of their career paths and have made clear-cut plans. Of these eight foreign language majors, three are pursuing careers in line with their intrinsic motivation stemming from a desire to help people. For example, Louise, who credited economic considerations as a definite, albeit minor, factor in her major choice and whose intrinsic motivation was the love of

language itself coupled with a desire to use it to help people, plans to go to law school. She is considering either being a civil rights attorney or a victim's advocate attorney or "something like that ...just to be able to help people is kind of where I'm focused now."

Bettye, who negated the role of economic considerations as a factor in her choice of major, plans to apply to the Peace Corps to use her Spanish to help people and then perhaps serve as a translator. Ruth, who also negated the role of economic considerations as a factor in her choice of major, plans on a career in healthcare. She stated her intrinsic motivation for majoring in Spanish is the desire to communicate with people in order to better serve them and added, "I want to be a missionary doctor."

Five additional students among the foreign language majors have specific career goals. Dennis, who stated economic considerations had no bearing on his choice of major, has applied and been accepted to graduate school where he plans to earn a master's degree in translation and interpretation with a concentration in conference and community interpreting. To accomplish his dreams, he has already started his own limited liability company. Additionally, Dean, Mary, and Alice, all of whom expressed that economic considerations had very little influence in their choice of majors, have definite career plans. Dean plans to become a teacher by enrolling in the Transition to Teaching program after receiving his BA. Mary plans to use her Spanish education major to teach in an elementary or middle school. Alice also plans to use her French education major as a French teacher or as the TESL coordinator for a company. Bev, the only one of this group who credited economic considerations as a decisive factor in her decision to pursue a second degree, wants to use her Spanish major in a career with the FBI; she is especially interested in becoming an intelligence analyst.

Among the foreign language majors, two are undecided about their eventual careers and have no clear-cut next steps lined up. Both participants expressed that economic considerations were minor factors in their choice of major. Jeannie, the oldest student in the study, is pursuing

her second college degree but is unsure of how she might proceed. And Elizabeth, who loves problem solving and research, is hoping to find a career where she can use Spanish in this capacity.

Among the 10 participants who chose to major in a field other than foreign language, eight are relatively certain of their career paths and have made specific plans. Of these eight, five are pursuing careers in line with their intrinsic motivation stemming from a desire to help people. For example, Joanne, who has always had a longing to help people and who also stated that economic considerations “absolutely” played into her choice of major, will work “inside the systems that don’t always benefit everyone” as a lawyer. Justine, a neuroscience major, who nullified economic considerations as a factor in her degree choice intends to follow her passion and “be somebody who takes care of people” by becoming a doctor. Sharon, a psychology major, who gave future employment some thought but stated that economic consideration was not a priority, and who declared her motivation as a love of volunteering and helping others, plans to become a “therapist or counselor for children.” Kathy, an athletic training major, who stated that economic considerations figured somewhat into her major choice but asserted that her passion is helping children, plans to become a pediatric physical therapist. Suzanne, who specified that economic considerations did not figure into her choice of major, also has a passion for helping children and is planning to translate that passion into a career as a pediatric surgeon.

Three additional students among those majoring in a subject other than foreign language have specific career goals. Bill, who is majoring in computer science as well as statistics and data and who declared that economic considerations were “absolutely” a factor in his choice of major, is planning to begin his career as a software engineer and work his way up in a technology company while doing data interpretation as a consultant on the side. Nancy, who remarked that economic consideration was “some of the influence” on her choosing the field of

business, reported that she will soon be taking the admission tests and applying to law schools. Linda, who stated “not really” when asked if economic considerations played into her choice of major, plans to get a job in her major field, civil engineering, and hopefully have her master’s degree paid for by her employer. She is considering a master’s in environmental engineering as well as civil engineering.

Paralleling the group of foreign language majors, two participants who are majoring in subjects other than foreign language are also undecided about their future careers and have no definitive plans for the next phase of their lives. Jim, who related that economic consideration in the form of concern had entered into his choice of a history degree, reported that he is “still not even sure” but added, “if there is an actual place for jobs like this... I really want to be a historian consultant for classical times for movies, shows, or video games.” Frank, who commented that economic considerations were definitely a factor in his choice of major, responded to this question saying, “I don’t have a plan yet.”

### **Table 5**

*Likely Career Paths Reported by 10 Foreign Language Majors and 10 Majors in Other Fields*

Career paths	Students majoring in FL	Students majoring in other fields
Health professions	1	4
Lawyer	1	2
Teacher	3	0
Engineering	0	2
Peace Corps	1	0
FBI (intelligence analyst)	1	0
Business	1	0
Undecided	2	2

Because a major case study objective is to interpret the participants’ understanding of their place in the world (Creswell, 2013), the replies to this second interview question regarding

the students' future careers were scrutinized as a source that could add meaning to the participants' responses to the first interview question regarding intrinsic motivation (sub-question e) and economic considerations (sub-question f) as factors influencing degree choice.

Looking at the responses surrounding likely careers in comparison to the replies to the a *priori* theme of economic considerations did not deepen the understanding of the role of economic considerations in the participants' place in the world. Rather, the participants from both interview groups with well-reasoned career plans included those who factored in economic considerations and those who did not factor in economic considerations when selecting their major. Furthermore, the two participants among the foreign language majors with no career plans had expressed that economic considerations were minorly influential in their degree choice while the two participants among the non-foreign language majors with no career plans had expressed that economic considerations were considerably influential. Thus, from the responses regarding economic considerations as related to degree choice no systematic patterns, interrelationships, or common themes emerged that could help in the interpretation of the participants' perceived place in the world.

In contrast, comparing the responses surrounding likely careers to the responses related to a *priori* theme of intrinsic motivation resulted in increased understanding of the participants' place in the world. By coding and categorizing statements made by both the foreign language majors and those majoring in other fields regarding the causation for their intrinsic interest and the culmination of this causation in their career choice, the participants' interpretation of their place in the world was revealed. As is often the case, "Degrees of strength in themes may lead to the naming of subthemes" (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, p. 91). In the context of this study, analyzing the responses regarding likely career paths added another degree of strength to the development of the previously discussed subtheme that emerged secondary to the a *priori* theme of intrinsic interest or passion. Specifically, the desire to help others as a subtheme

added understanding to the “why” of the intrinsic interest and to the “how” this passion manifests itself in career choices.

**Table 6**

*Numbers of Selected Career Paths Stemming from a Desire to Help Others*

Career paths	Students majoring in FL	Students majoring in other fields
Health professions	1	4
Lawyer	1	1
Peace Corps	1	0
Teacher	0	0
Engineering	0	0
FBI (intelligence analyst)	0	0
Business	0	0

### ***Responses to Interview Question 3***

The question *What ideas can you suggest for strengthening the FL program?* was designed with a two-fold purpose. The first objective was to give foreign language majors the opportunity to discuss their subjective experiences with the curricular content and pedagogical approaches of their university coursework. In this way, the question addressed the *a priori* theme which identifies college curriculum and pedagogy as influential in choosing a major. The second objective was to garner suggestions for improving the foreign language program from the FL 112 students who opted not to continue with foreign language and instead chose a different field of study.

By exploring highlighted words and phrases appearing in the responses to this question, codes were developed. As a result of collating the data into groups according to these codes, cluster analysis revealed three subthemes supplementing the *a priori* theme of college curriculum and pedagogical approaches as influential in choosing a major. These subthemes include *interdisciplinary collaboration with a focus on careers, opportunities for conversation,*

*and community-based learning*. Additionally, through analysis of the connective patterns in the data, a fourth subtheme evolved which supported the emerging theme of high school and middle school programs as influential in major choice. This subtheme, entitled *departmental outreach*, emanated primarily from the responses of those students who chose majors other than foreign language.

**Interdisciplinary Collaboration with a Focus on Careers.** As suggestions for strengthening the foreign language program, several of the language majors stressed the need for an interdisciplinary curriculum with a focus on careers. They saw this approach as a way to both recruit and retain majors. Alice, a French education major, suggested the foreign language department partner with the business department with the idea of “showcasing what languages can do for the business market.” She pointed out that the business department’s current website “promoted studying abroad, because, of course, it opens you to numerous cultures... however, they did not mention anything about foreign language.” She continued commenting that foreign language “is crucial in an international business scene.” As part of an interdisciplinary approach, Alice also stressed the importance of offering scholarships as a way to bolster the foreign language program and attract majors, stating “I know that it is not always feasible...but I feel what attracts the most attention is a scholarship.” She recommended an interdisciplinary partnership between the foreign language department and the education department’s popular TESL minor which would provide a scholarship for a TESL minor who chose foreign language as a major. Jeannie, also a French major, commented on working with other departments in the development of an entry-level foreign language class introducing all the languages taught with a focus on careers so that students could see the advantages in continuing their language studies.

Dean echoed the focus on careers specifying that a course on interpretation would be a good idea. He related this suggestion to more interdisciplinary courses where students could



learn “the jargon” related to a particular discipline which, in turn, would “definitely get people interested” in continuing with a foreign language. Bev stated the need for cooperation among the departments, commenting on the difficulty of scheduling required foreign language courses due to conflicts with courses in other departments.

Some of the students who chose not to major in a foreign language also expressed the need to create classes that linked to career goals which, consequently, could entice students to double major. Joanne mentioned the need for a class that incorporated legal studies. Sharon, who wants to be a child therapist, attested to the need for an interdisciplinary approach, when she stated that no one in the psychology department had suggested adding a foreign language to her major.

Others in this group of participants, echoing Bev’s frustration, supported the need for an interdisciplinary approach through statements pointing to the lack of coordinated curricula and scheduling between departments. Audrey, who is majoring in athletic training and would like to continue in Spanish, reported that her advisor in athletic training did not think there would be enough time for her to complete the Spanish major with a concentration in medical Spanish. Further, Suzanne, a student on the pre-med path who had originally planned to continue with Spanish, thought it might be too difficult to coordinate all of the required classes and sought out the advice of her biology advisors. She reported that although they thought her continuing with Spanish “would be a really good idea,” they also said that having a studio art class might be less problematic in scheduling and “a good decompression type of class;” thus, Suzanne dropped her Spanish major.

**Opportunities for Conversation.** The foreign language majors emphasized conversation as a pedagogical approach to attract and maintain majors thereby strengthening the foreign language program. They stressed the importance of conversing in the classroom itself, in the community, and through study abroad programs. For example, Ruth reported that

her “biggest suggestion” would be a greater “emphasis on the classes being conversation-based” and continued that “just being able to communicate... is kind of the main goal for me.” Jeannie echoed this desire and suggested an “emphasis on culture, film, music, and theatre” as conversational topics. Furthermore, as a way to focus on conversation, she suggested bringing knowledgeable native speakers from the community to present on the topic studied in the class. Louise spoke in terms of maintaining a “connection” with the language and advocated more opportunities to converse within the classroom and moreover wondered if the university could offer “things outside of the classroom.”

Bridging this gap between conversations in class and out of class, Bettye suggested bringing native speakers from campus into classrooms so that students could “interview” them. She also mentioned “fun activities such as field trips...to like museums and zoos” as part of a class where students would have “casual conversations” as opposed to conversing around the academic topics associated with the class. Jeannie also suggested field trips as an important element. Bev mentioned a fun class that she had enjoyed which, as part of the pedagogical approach, required students to make regular trips to a Mexican restaurant where they communicated with the restaurant personnel. Dennis echoed the theme of conversing with native speakers outside the classroom but focused on “exposure” through online programs connecting students with speakers from other countries. Dean suggested more opportunities to converse with people in the community to build conversational skills “since not everyone can afford to study abroad.”

Emphasizing the importance of study abroad in mastering conversational skills, Bettye proposed that the university provide funding and scholarships so that all majors would have the opportunity to study abroad. Jeannie suggested securing a relationship with specific programs and universities abroad to alleviate the students’ stress and time commitment involved in searching for a university, acquiring their syllabus, and hoping their class requirements meet the

standards of the campus foreign language department. She added that the establishment of this study abroad relationship would not only strengthen the foreign language program but would benefit the individual students who would feel “more comfortable to go to a place that had a history with us.”

**Community-based Learning.** The foreign language majors had several ideas regarding community-based learning, previously defined as learning from the community while addressing their needs. They saw a curriculum offering classes with a service-learning component as a way to attract majors and maintain their interest. They also saw service-learning programs as not only beneficial for the community but also for themselves in developing their listening and speaking skills as language learners. Betty commented on the importance of “real-world, community experience” and suggested practicing the language, in this case Spanish, by “going out into schools and teaching or helping with the classroom.” She commented that “children make it so much easier to practice because they are still learning themselves.” Mary contributed that children are “very forgiving teachers, and if you make a mistake, they immediately correct you and think it’s funny, and it’s a low-stress situation.” Mary also emphasized that she was “craving... real-life experience, for example, volunteering and being able to talk with people from the Hispanic community.” Alice commented that such courses “would be great for benefitting the community as well as the college students.” Louise asserted that community-based learning could be a senior project incorporating research and addressing community needs. Ruth advocated for service-learning classes and reiterated the need for research opportunities.

**Departmental Outreach.** In addition to the suggestions for strengthening the foreign language program posited by the foreign language majors, further suggestions, focusing on departmental outreach, were proposed by students who had chosen majors other than foreign language. These suggestions reflect the emerging theme of middle and high school programs

as influential in major choice. The students' recommendations sometimes offered reasons why they personally had not considered a foreign language major in their choice of degree. Joanne suggested better outreach to communicate the importance of foreign language and what the university offers and emphasized "local high school outreach would be great." She further offered an idea that was underscored at a high school-sponsored health institute she had attended. She explained that the professionals at this summer camp emphasized that students going into healthcare professions need not major in the sciences but rather can choose different majors that would be advantageous to their careers. Joanne added that foreign language would be a "really great major if you're trying to go into medical school because you'll have this background."

Other students also recommended that the university's foreign language department reach out to the middle schools and high schools. Justine reported that she regretted not continuing to study foreign language, saying that the importance of linking Spanish to the medical field had not been stressed at her high school. Likewise, Frank had not heard of the advantage of linking a language major to global business. Additionally, Jim, who had been interested in history since early childhood, reported that no one had ever talked to him about combining history and foreign language and that only now was he realizing "how that could be very helpful on the job."

#### ***Responses to Interview Question 4***

The question Do you have any thoughts that you would like to add before we conclude the interview? produced only one response. Alice, the French education major, suggested a class entitled "World Languages" which would be listed as a "discovery class" for university freshmen to introduce them to different languages and extend them a chance to start a new language in alignment with another major or prospective career if they so desired. She added that the university could also offer such a course to high school students and "really even

eighth-grade middle-schoolers.” Her suggestions speak to strengthening the foreign language program through the *a priori* theme of college curriculum and pedagogy, centered on the subtheme of interdisciplinary collaboration with a focus on careers, as well as strengthening the department through the emerging theme of middle and high school programs.

### **Summary**

A case study at a small, private, Midwestern university was designed to investigate the decline in foreign language majors by identifying factors influencing the choice of college majors and exploring initiatives to strengthen the foreign language program. To facilitate the understanding of the phenomenon being studied, the transcripts of the semi-structured interviews held with 20 participants were analyzed by combining deductive and inductive methods of coding to generate categories and themes grounded in the social construct theory of student choice and aligned with the interpretivist paradigm. Data analysis consisted of a four-step approach: introductory phase, exploratory phase, specification phase, and integration phase.

A deductive coding approach was used to analyze the *a priori* themes of interpersonal relationships, intrinsic motivation or passion, and economic considerations garnered from the review of literature as key factors in major choice. In addition to these *a priori* themes, a new theme emerged from inductive coding as students shared their subjective experiences and socially constructed knowledge regarding influential factors in their choice of major. This new theme, which developed as an influential factor in the choice of college major, was entitled *middle and high school programs*.

An analysis of the responses to the first interview question, designed to ascertain the key variables in major choice, revealed intrinsic interest/ passion as the factor most often cited as influential in choosing a major. Half of those who cited intrinsic interest as a predominant factor linked their motivation to the desire to help others. Based on the recurrence of this

pattern, a subtheme to the *a priori* theme of intrinsic interest was established and entitled *desire to help others*.

The second interview question, which asked participants to discuss their likely career paths, provided insight into their decision-making process and the “why” of their career plans. Specifically, their responses revealed the *a priori* theme of intrinsic interest/passion along with the subtheme of desire to help others as being the most influential factor in their career choice, thus reinforcing intrinsic motivation as the key factor in choosing a major. Only one participant majoring in foreign language and two participants majoring in other fields emphasized economic considerations as high priority in their choice of careers.

The third interview question asked students for ideas to strengthen the foreign language program. This question was designed to explore the *a priori* theme of college curriculum and pedagogy as influential in major choice through the lens of the participants’ subjective experiences. The participants’ responses yielded four subthemes. The first three subthemes, based principally on suggestions by the foreign language majors, were entitled *interdisciplinary collaboration with an emphasis on careers, opportunities for conversation, and community-based learning*. The fourth subtheme, based primarily on the responses of the students who had chosen majors other than foreign language, was entitled *departmental outreach* and reinforced the emerging theme of middle and high school programs as influential in major choice.

The last interview question asked the participants if they had any other thoughts before concluding the interview. Only one participant responded. The two-fold response reflected the *a priori* theme of college curriculum and pedagogy, reiterating the need for interdisciplinary collaboration, and additionally reflected the theme of middle and high school programs with a suggestion for a foreign language discovery course that the department could offer in local middle and/or high schools.

The results of the interview questions have been presented and discussed in detail to ensure an adequate explanation of the findings and to provide responses to the following research questions:

1. What factors influence students to choose a foreign language major?
2. What factors influence students to choose majors other than a foreign language?
3. Are there differences and similarities in the factors influencing major choice identified by students majoring in a foreign language and those not majoring in a foreign language?
4. What initiatives do students suggest as ways to strengthen the foreign language program?

A discussion of the findings organized by research questions, the relationship of the findings to the review of literature, the implications of the findings, and recommendations for further research appear in Chapter 5.

## Chapter 5: Conclusions

This chapter encompasses a discussion of the findings of a single case study that examined the decline in foreign language majors at a small, private, Midwestern university. The decline in foreign language as a degree choice, a problem at this particular university, represents a collective problem of great importance in higher education since it affects not only the individual and the community but also society in general (MLA, 2007). The disconcerting decline is confirmed by the 2019 MLA report which enumerates a 15.3% decrease in foreign language enrollment at the university level between 2009 and 2016 (Looney & Lusin, 2019). Although a substantial amount of research is available on factors influencing the choice of major in general, a gap exists in relating these factors, and potentially others, to the choice of foreign language per se as a major. The purpose of this case study was to investigate the decline in foreign language majors at this particular university by identifying factors influencing the choice of college majors and exploring initiatives to strengthen the foreign language program.

The study was a holistic, single case study design using qualitative methodology to investigate major choice within the empirical context of foreign language study at this small, private university. This approach is consistent with Yin's explanation of a holistic design in which a set of conditions is investigated "within its real-life context" (2003, p. 13). The data were obtained through semi-structured Zoom interviews. The total number of 20 participants met the limit for qualitative interview studies as recommended by Crouch and McKenzie (2006). The participants were divided evenly between students who had declared a foreign language major and students in elementary-level foreign language classes, designated as FL 112, who had declared a subject other than foreign language as a major.

All the interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed. The data were then analyzed using a four-step process that involved the emergence of patterns, categories, and



themes. Pertinent portions of data collected were synthesized and aligned with the overarching research questions. The findings demonstrated that the research questions were answered.

These findings (organized by research question) along with their relationship to the reviewed literature are discussed in this chapter. Additionally, implications for the practice of foreign language education, recommendations for further research, and conclusions are presented in this chapter.

## **Discussion of the Findings**

### ***Research Question 1***

What factors influence students to choose a foreign language major? The reported decline in foreign languages studies at universities across America (Looney & Lusin, 2019) is evident at the small, private, Midwestern university chosen for this case study. From 2003 to 2020, the number of foreign language majors dropped by 63.9% (Fact Book, 2003-04 and Fact Book, 2020-21). To determine factors specifically influencing the choice of foreign language as a major, three *a priori* themes cited in the preponderance of literature as influential in the selection of a college major were used as the starting point for the study. These factors were interpersonal relationships; intrinsic interest or motivation; and economic outcomes. Analysis of the interview responses to this first research question yielded an additional key theme as well as a subtheme. The emerging theme, representing the fourth influential factor in major choice, was middle and high school programs. The desire to help others emerged as a subtheme to the *a priori* theme of intrinsic interest.

The wide-ranging theme of interpersonal relationships was subdivided into peers, family, university personnel, and K-12 teachers and counselors. Looking first at peers, the findings of the study indicate that this interpersonal relationship had no bearing on the choice of foreign language as a major. None of the 10 students majoring in foreign language was influenced in their decision by peers. Likewise, with regard to the influence of family, the findings indicate that

this factor had no bearing on the students' choice of major. None of the foreign language students related their degree choice to the influence of a family member. Moreover, the findings indicate that university personnel, such as admission counselors, academic advisors, and professors, did not factor as influential in the choice of foreign language as a major in this study. Rather, all the foreign language majors stated they had made their degree choice before enrolling in the university.

On the other hand, the findings demonstrate that the K-12 interpersonal relationships, which include grade school teachers, middle school teachers, high school teachers, and high school counselors, were very influential in the choice of foreign language as a major. This variable elicited a nearly unanimous response from the ten foreign language majors with all but one crediting their middle and high school teachers for their love of foreign language and to some degree their decision to major in a world language. The participants described these teachers as encouraging, fun, inspirational, creative, and challenging. The one foreign language major who did not attribute interpersonal relationships as influential explained that his sole reason for majoring in foreign language arose from autonomous motivation.

Besides interpersonal relationships, intrinsic interest, also referred to as passion, was examined as a possible factor influencing students to choose a foreign language major. The findings indicate that intrinsic interest was of prime importance in the students' choice. Eight of the 10 participants referred to this factor as paramount in their choice of major. The students used superlatives to refer to their love of the language, the culture, and the people with whom they communicate through the foreign language. The findings also indicate the importance of the desire to help others. This desire to help others became a prominent factor in the discussion of intrinsic interest and thus developed into a subtheme. Three of the eight students explained that they want to help people by using their knowledge of the foreign language and that their passion for learning a world language springs from this desire. Of the two participants who did

not cite intrinsic interest as a predominant influence in their choice to major in a foreign language, one is an older, second-degree student, and the other defaulted to foreign language when she was not able to major in theater. The latter, however, remarked that through her studies she has become passionate about the language and the culture and that she intends to use her major to help others by joining the Peace Corps.

In addition to interpersonal relationships and intrinsic motivation, the factor of economic considerations was explored as potentially influential in choosing a foreign language major. The response of the foreign language majors was varied. The findings indicate that economic considerations played a role in the decision-making process of the majority of foreign language majors but in differing degrees. Seven of the participants stated that they considered economic implications when choosing their major. Six of the seven students reported economic considerations as somewhat of a factor or definitely a factor, albeit not a big one. Only one of the seven reported economic considerations as a core reason for her foreign language major. This is a second-degree student who returned seeking a degree in Spanish to aid in achieving her career goal as an intelligence analyst for the FBI. The three remaining participants disavowed the role of economics in choosing their foreign language major.

Lastly, the emerging theme of middle and high school programs was evaluated as a possible factor influencing students to choose a foreign language major. The findings indicate this factor played a key role in the choice of major for four of the 10 participants. One student commented on the importance of summer camps in the decision-making process. Of particular importance were community-based learning programs and school-sponsored trips abroad. Specifically, one foreign language major referred to working with kindergarteners in a bilingual classroom while she was in high school as an inspirational experience. Two other students noted that study abroad opportunities while in high school inspired and motivated them to choose a foreign language major.

### ***Research Question 2***

What factors influence students to choose majors other than a foreign language? To determine the factors utilized by students at this university when choosing a major other than foreign language, the same themes employed for the first research question were implemented. Thus, the analysis of the interview responses to this second research question included the influential variables of interpersonal relationships; intrinsic interest or motivation; economic considerations; and middle and high school programs.

To examine interpersonal relationships, the variable was subdivided into peers, family, university personnel, and K-12 teachers and counselors. With regard to peers, the findings of the study indicate that this interpersonal relationship had little or no bearing on the choice of major among those students who had elected to pursue majors other than a foreign language. Nine students reported that peer influence was not a factor in their decision. Only one student in this group of ten participants reported that peer influence was a factor in her decision-making process. However, the peer, in this case, was not a colleague or a friend but rather a contemporary whom she met while touring the campus. This contemporary, a university student ambassador, urged her to follow through with the choice of major she had been contemplating. Similarly, with regard to the influence of family, the findings indicate that this variable had no bearing on the students' choice of major. No one in this group of students who chose majors other than a foreign language related their degree choice to the influence of a family member.

In contrast, the findings demonstrate that university personnel, such as admission counselors, academic advisors, and professors, played a role in the choice of degree among those majoring in fields other than foreign language. Specifically, two participants credited their professors, and two credited their academic advisors; yet none of the students cited admission counselors as influential in the decision-making process. The findings also demonstrate that K-

12 interpersonal relationships were influential in the choice of major among this group. Of these 10 students, five reported that their former teachers had influenced their degree choice. One student credited elementary, middle, and high school teachers as influential, while another cited a high school teacher, who unofficially served as a mentor and counselor, as the inspiration for her degree choice. Three additional students acknowledged the influence of their middle and high school teachers, but their reflection about their instructors was framed within the larger matrix of their schools' academic programs.

In addition to interpersonal relationships, intrinsic interest, also designated as passion, was investigated as a possible influential factor among students who choose majors other than a foreign language. The findings indicate that intrinsic interest was of primary importance in the students' degree choice. Eight of the 10 participants majoring in subjects other than foreign language attributed their choice of majors in large part to intrinsic motivation. Five of these students reflected on their intrinsic passion as springing from the desire to help others, thus reinforcing this motif. One of the two participants who did not refer to intrinsic interest as key in his decision-making process is a global business major who based his degree choice on pamphlets that he picked up and the fact that he does not like science. The other participant, who eventually settled on finance as her major, also reflected on her choice as a default decision rather than one due to intrinsic motivation.

In conjunction with interpersonal relationships and intrinsic motivation, the variable of economic considerations was examined as possibly influential among students who select majors other than a foreign language. The findings indicate that economic considerations played a part in the decision-making process for the majority of these students but in varying degrees of importance. Seven of the participants stated that economic considerations figured into their choice of major. Three of the seven cited economic considerations as critical in their choice. Two reflected on salary and job availability as concerns in their choice of major. Two other

students in this group stated that economics considerations played a minor role in choosing their majors. The three remaining participants negated the role of economics in their choice of major maintaining their decision was based on intrinsic motivation.

Finally, middle and high school programs were considered as a potential variable influencing students who choose majors other than a foreign language. The findings reveal that this factor played an extremely important role in the choice of major among five of the 10 participants. One student emphasized his high school's career-focused math program as a determining factor in his major choice. Two additional students underscored the school district's career education programs as influential in their major choice. Another student focused on community programs and credited her high school's communications studies, which emphasized student participation in school and community activities, as a determinant in her choice of majors. And one student extolled summer camps as sparking her interest in what she would choose as her major.

### ***Research Question 3***

Are there differences and similarities in the factors influencing major choice identified by students majoring in a foreign language and those not majoring in a foreign language? Although the results of the analysis denoted divergence in the responses depending on the factor, the findings indicate more similarities than differences overall.

Regarding the influence of interpersonal relationships, the findings show that the responses from both groups concerning the variables of peers and family were nearly identical. For example, among the 10 students majoring in foreign language, peer influence was not seen as influential in their choice; and only one student among the 10 participants majoring in subjects other than foreign language acknowledged peer influence as a factor in her decision-making process. This peer was not a friend or close acquaintance but rather a student ambassador whom she met while touring the university. Furthermore, family as an influential

factor in the choice of major was the only variable that generated a unanimous response. Specifically, none of the participants, whether majoring in foreign language or in other fields, related their degree choice to the influence of a family member.

However, when discussing the interpersonal relationships of university personnel and K-12 personnel, the findings show greater differences than similarities concerning the influence that these factors have on degree choice identified by students majoring in a foreign language and those not majoring in a foreign language. Specifically, results between the two groups of participants varied substantially with regard to admission counselors, academic advisors, and professors as influential factors in choosing a major. None of the foreign language majors credited university personnel with their decision but rather stated that their decision was made prior to enrolling in the university. On the other hand, four of the 10 participants majoring in subjects other than foreign language credited university personnel as having a role in their decision. Similarly, discussions centered on the interpersonal relationships of K-12 teachers and counselors resulted in a substantial difference with respect to the influence this variable wielded. Specifically, nine of the 10 foreign language majors attested to the substantial influence of this factor in choosing their degree. However, only five of the 10 participants in the group majoring in fields other than foreign language considered this factor as an important influence in their degree choice.

Regarding the influence of intrinsic interest or passion, the results between the two groups of participants were identical. Eight of the 10 participants in each group referred to the factor of intrinsic interest as predominant in their choice of major. Of the eight foreign language majors, three credited their intrinsic motivation to a desire to help others. And among the eight participants majoring in subjects other than foreign language, five credited their intrinsic motivation to a desire to help others.

As regards the variable of economic considerations, the responses between the two groups again coincided numerically. Seven participants in each group stated that economic considerations, such as job availability, the chance of advancement, and salary levels, played a role in their choice of major. Yet, the degree of consideration given to economic wherewithal differed between the two groups. Economic considerations figured more prominently among those students majoring in subjects other than foreign language. Specifically, among the seven foreign language majors who asserted that economic considerations had played a role in their decision-making process, six described these considerations as somewhat influential, while only one foreign language major related economic wherewithal as a cardinal factor in her major choice. Conversely, among the seven participants majoring in fields other than foreign language, three considered economic wherewithal a critical factor in their degree choice, two spoke of economic considerations as a definite factor or concern in their choice, and the two remaining members of this group stated that economic factors were a consideration but not a priority in their selection of a major.

With respect to the factor of middle and high school programs, the findings again indicate more similarities than differences in comparing the relative influence of this variable as identified by students majoring in foreign language and by those majoring in other fields. Specifically, four of the 10 students majoring in world languages commented on the importance of middle and high school programs in ultimately determining the choice of major. Comparably, five of the 10 students majoring in subjects other than foreign language emphasized middle and high school programs as determinants in degree choice.

Summarizing, when comparing the factors influencing degree choice identified by students majoring in a foreign language and those not majoring in a foreign language, the findings indicate numerical unanimity with regard to the *a priori* variables of intrinsic motivation and economic considerations and great similarity with regard to the emerging variable middle



and high school programs. Within the *a priori* category of interpersonal relations, the findings demonstrate that the relative influence of peers and family in choosing a major is similar between students majoring in foreign language and those majoring in other subjects. However, the findings demonstrate substantial differences with regard to university personnel and K-12 personnel as factors influencing degree choice identified by students majoring in foreign language and those majoring in fields other than foreign language.

**Table 7**

*Comparing Key Factors Identified by Foreign Language Majors and Majors in Other Fields*

Four key themes in major choice	Number of majors		Total
	Foreign language	Other fields	
Interpersonal relationships			
Peers	0	1	1
Family	0	0	0
University personnel	0	4	4
K-12 teachers/counselors	9	5	14
Intrinsic interest/passion	8	8	16
Economic considerations	7	7	14
Middle and high school programs	4	5	9

*Note.*  $N=10$  for foreign language majors and  $N=10$  for majors in other fields.

As illustrated by Table 7, many similarities and few differences were found between the key factors influential in major choice identified by the group of participants who had chosen foreign language as their major and the group of participants who had chosen subjects other than foreign language as their major. The factor most often cited as influential in choosing a major was intrinsic interest. Of the 16 participants who cited this factor, eight asserted the desire to help others as the source of their intrinsic motivation. The table also indicates the importance of K-12 teachers and counselors with 14 participants declaring this factor as influential in their choice. Although 14 participants also cited economic considerations as a factor in their choice of

major, most referred to this variable as having only minor influence. Only one foreign language major declared economic considerations as clearly important in her choice, and only three of those participants majoring in other fields declared economic considerations as unquestionably important. Additionally, the table reveals the importance of middle and high school programs, such as career tracks and school-sponsored community events, with nine participants citing this factor as influential in their choice of major.

Because a fundamental case study objective is to interpret the participants' understanding of their place in the world (Creswell, 2013), the students in both groups were asked what career path they would most likely pursue. Their replies were scrutinized as a source that could add meaning to the differences and similarities in their responses concerning the influence of economic considerations and intrinsic motivation in choosing a major.

Among the 10 foreign language majors, eight were relatively sure of their career paths and have made clear-cut plans. Of these eight foreign language majors, three plan to pursue careers in keeping with their intrinsic motivation emanating from a desire to help people. Four have specific career plans not related to economic considerations. The one student who credited economic considerations as a decisive factor in her degree decision has a definitive career path. Both foreign language majors who remain undecided regarding careers expressed that economic considerations were minor factors in their degree choice.

Among the 10 participants majoring in subjects other than foreign language, eight were relatively certain regarding their career paths and have made definitive plans. Within this group of eight students, five plan to pursue careers in line with their intrinsic motivation springing from a desire to help people. Among the other three with definite career plans, one declared that economic considerations were critical in his choice of major, one cited economic wherewithal as a minor consideration, and the other declared economic considerations as not important. The

two remaining participants are undecided with regard to careers but expressed that economic concerns were definite factors in their degree choice.

Comparing the responses regarding likely careers to the responses regarding economic considerations as influential in choosing a major did not deepen the understanding of the role of economic wherewithal in the participants' place in the world, nor did it add meaning to the differences and similarities between the two groups as regards the influence of economic considerations in degree choice. Rather, among both the foreign language majors and the non-foreign language majors were participants with well-reasoned career plans who had factored in economic considerations when selecting their major and participants with well-reasoned career plans who had not factored in economic considerations when selecting their major.

Furthermore, the two participants with no career plans in the group of foreign language majors had expressed that economic considerations were only minorly influential in their degree choice, while the two participants with no career plans in the group of students majoring in fields other than foreign language had expressed that economic considerations were considerably influential in their degree choice. Thus, no systematic patterns, interrelationships, or common themes emerged from the responses regarding economic considerations as related to degree choice that could help in the interpretation of the participants' perceived place in the world.

In contrast, comparing the responses regarding likely careers to the responses regarding intrinsic motivation as influential in choosing a major resulted in increased understanding of the participants' place in the world. Through coding and categorizing statements made by both the foreign language majors and those majoring in subjects other than foreign language concerning the causation for their intrinsic interest and the anticipated fulfillment of this causation in their career choice, the participants' interpretation of their place in the world was affirmed. Analyzing the responses regarding likely career paths added strength to the development of the previously articulated subtheme, which emerged secondary to the theme of intrinsic interest or passion.

Namely, the desire to help others as a subtheme added insight as to the “why” of the intrinsic interest and the “how” this passion reveals itself in career choices.

#### **Research Question 4**

What initiatives do students suggest as ways to strengthen the foreign language program?

This question addressed the *a priori* theme which identifies college curriculum and pedagogy as influential in choosing a major. By affording the participants the opportunity to ponder their experiences with world languages and offer recommendations to improve the foreign language program, the question is representative of this case study which operated within the interpretivist paradigm, a research framework derived from the conviction that reality and knowledge are relative, multiple, confabulated, and socially constructed. Coding and cluster analysis of the responses to this question resulted in three subthemes which include interdisciplinary collaboration with a focus on careers, opportunities for conversation, and community-based learning. Additionally, a subtheme entitled departmental outreach evolved from the emergent theme of middle and high school programs as influential in major choice. The findings are discussed below.

**Interdisciplinary Collaboration with a Focus on Careers.** According to both FL majors and those majoring in other subjects, one way to strengthen the foreign language program is through an interdisciplinary curriculum with a focus on careers. Students saw this approach as a way to both recruit and retain majors. They emphasized cooperation among the university’s departments in conjunction with a focus on career paths and related majors, and they suggested coordinating both curricula and scheduling among departments. In particular, students suggested offering an entry-level foreign language class with a focus on careers to introduce all languages offered at the university. The participants specified partnering with the school of business. Another suggestion was a partnership with the education department’s

popular TESL minor and the offer of a scholarship to students who select a foreign language major to accompany their TESL minor. Students expressed the need to create foreign language classes linked to career goals to encourage double majors, yet several students from both groups of participants reported the virtual impossibility of adding foreign language to another major due to scheduling conflicts resulting from the lack of coordination among the departments.

**Opportunities for Conversation.** As a means of strengthening the foreign language program, the foreign language majors emphasized conversation as a pedagogical practice to attract and maintain majors. They placed importance on conversing in the classroom itself and suggested bringing in native speakers. Students also suggested focusing classroom conversations on culture-related topics such as film and music.

Another idea centered on conversational opportunities in the community. Students specified field trips to the zoo, the museum, and restaurants. One student mentioned developing conversation skills through online technologies designed to connect U.S. students with students in other countries.

Lastly, students emphasized study abroad programs as a way to gain oral competence. They suggested funding scholarships so that all majors would have an opportunity to study abroad. One participant recommended forming relationships with specific programs and universities abroad to streamline the study abroad process.

**Community-based Learning.** The foreign language majors specified community-based learning as a way to attract majors and maintain their interest. They saw a curriculum offering classes with a service-learning component as having a dual advantage. Specifically, the participants commented on a service-learning approach as beneficial for the community but also beneficial for themselves in developing listening and speaking skills. As an example, they advocated going into community schools to help second language learners. Additionally, some

of the foreign language majors stressed the need for research opportunities and proposed community-based learning as a way to incorporate research to address community needs.

**Departmental Outreach.** An additional suggestion for strengthening the foreign language program focused on departmental outreach. This suggestion reflects the importance of middle and high school programs as influential in major choice. Most of the recommendations for outreach emanated from the students majoring in subjects other than foreign language. Participants spoke of the need for outreach to local middle and high schools to communicate the importance of foreign language and what this particular university can offer. Some of these students stated that they had not been made aware of the benefits of linking a language major to their degree choice in their K-12 schooling. Two students enunciated regret that they came to this realization on their own but too late in their college career to add a foreign language major. Both foreign language majors and those majoring in other fields mentioned career-oriented programs and tracks as well as school-sponsored clinics, summer camps, and trips abroad as avenues of outreach.

### **Findings in Relation to the Literature**

This section will consider the relationship between the research findings as presented in the reviewed literature and the findings of this case study which investigated the decline in foreign language majors at a small, private, Midwestern university by identifying factors influencing the choice of college majors and exploring initiatives to strengthen the foreign language program. The segment will discuss findings of this study that are consistent with the literature, findings that are not consistent with the literature, and findings that are not mentioned in the review of literature. The section will conclude with a summary and a discussion of the limitations of this study compared to the reviewed literature.

### ***Findings Consistent with the Reviewed Literature***

The findings of this study align with the literature regarding the significance of intrinsic interest or motivation on a student's choice of a college major. DeMarie and Aloise-Young (2003) substantiated the importance of intrinsic motivation in a study of education and business majors using a survey in which approximately 98% of these students confirmed interest as a key factor in choosing their major. Additionally, in a study by Kimweli and Richards (1999), art majors from three universities reported that passion was more important than the potential for a lucrative career. In this case study, eight of the 10 participants majoring in fields other than foreign language echoed these findings. Discussing intrinsic motivation as the key influential factor in their choice of major, one spoke of his "love" for the subject, two spoke of their lifelong passion for the field, and five spoke of an intrinsic motivation stemming from a desire to help others.

The importance of intrinsic motivation specifically related to foreign language learning was a focal point in the review of literature with studies by Gardner and Lambert (1959), Ramage (1990), and Burton et al. (2006) positing that the higher the level of intrinsic motivation, which Gardner referred to as integrative motivation, the more likely students were to continue their foreign language studies. The findings of this case study affirm these previous studies as well as Gardner's socio-educational model of second language acquisition (1985), which asserts that a student's intrinsic motivation is rooted in a personal interest in the culture and the people of the target language. At this small, private, Midwestern university, eight of the 10 foreign language majors spoke of intrinsic interest as the key factor in their decision to pursue foreign language pointing to a love of the language, of the culture, and of the people; and three of the eight extended this love to a desire to help others by means of the language.

Besides the consistency between this study and the reviewed literature regarding the influence of intrinsic motivation in the choice of major, consistency is also evident regarding the theme of economic considerations although to a lesser degree. Several studies in the review of

literature demonstrate that the focus of a college education is not on intellectual pursuit but rather on employment opportunity. One study indicated that males, in particular, chose their majors based on employment opportunities, salary, and the chance for career advancement (Malgwi et al., 2005). Another study placed job characteristics among the preeminent factors influencing degree choice (Beggs et al., 2008). Researchers using data from several sources from 1982 until 2012 found statistically significant correlations between changes in wages by occupation and subsequent changes in college majors (Long et al., 2015).

The findings of this study show that 14 out of the 20 participants acknowledged economic considerations to varying degrees of influence in their choice of major. Four of the 20 participants were male, and three of these four were influenced by economic considerations. Of the seven foreign language majors, only one declared economic considerations as fundamental to launching her passion for language into a successful career, whereas the other six attributed minor importance to this factor. Of the seven students majoring in fields other than foreign language, three asserted that economic considerations were a definitive factor in their choice of majors. Thus, even though the findings of this study reflect the theme of economic influence in the reviewed literature, only four of the 20 participants spoke of economic considerations as a pivotal factor in their degree choice.

### ***Findings Not Consistent with the Reviewed Literature***

The findings of this study do not align with the reviewed literature regarding interpersonal relationships. The literature focused on parental and peer influence as central in the choice of a student's college major. Studies asserted that parents began engaging with their children in middle school regarding degree choice (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). Data from a 2015 study of college freshmen who were undecided concerning degree choice showed parental influence more than academic advising as the decisive factor in the selection of a major (Workman, 2015). Studies also indicated that the occupational backgrounds of parents were influential in



the student's choice of major (Leppel et al., 2001). One study noted that parents in a lower socioeconomic status encouraged children to choose majors leading to well-paying jobs rather than majors reflecting typical gender roles (Ma, 2011). Other studies showed that the gender of the parents played a significant role in influencing the student's choice of major (Douvan, 1976; Smith, 2000; Adya & Kaiser, 2005). Yet another study emphasized that parents from collectivist cultures expect their children to choose fields of study that reflect their cultural heritage (Young et al., 2001). However, the findings from this study are directly antithetical to the reviewed literature. All 20 participants declared their parents had no influence on their choice of major. Ten participants made it a point to add that their family would have supported them in any decision. Furthermore, the only participant from a collectivist culture chose a major which is stigmatized by her culture rather than a major that would reflect her heritage.

Just as the findings in this study regarding parental influence fail to align with the reviewed literature, so also do the findings regarding peer influence. For example, a study by McDill & Coleman (1965) found that both family and peers are more influential on college decisions than the socioeconomic status of the family and that the types of peer groups influence the pursuit of particular degree choices. A study at West Point found that peer influence affected the choice of major as well as the decision to remain in the military (Lyle, 2007). A survey of 47,755 students in medical schools found peers to be generally influential but strongly influential with regard to high-performing females (Arcidiacono & Nicholson, 2005). Although a study at Dartmouth College indicated that peers were not influential in the choice of major, peers in that study were limited to freshmen dormitory roommates who were randomly assigned. (Sacerdote, 2001). In this case study, only one participant out of 20 mentioned peer influence, but even in that case, the participant's peer referred to a student ambassador whom she had just met and who encouraged her to follow through with the major she was already considering.

Another area of inconsistency regarding interpersonal relationships is the factor of K-12 teacher influence. Very few studies in the review of literature focus on the influence of elementary, middle, and/or high school teachers in the choice of a college major. A study entitled *Parental Influence on a Student's Selection of a College Major* conducted in 1997 showed that 19% of college freshmen cited their parents as the most significant factor in degree choice and 14% cited teachers as influential, thereby making them the second most significant group in the selection of a major (Pearson & Dellman-Jenkins, 1997). However, when the authors of a study at a large northeastern business school surveyed undergraduates, they found that high school teachers had a minor influence on degree choice (Malgwi et al., 2005). The findings of this case study indicate the opposite by revealing that 14 out of the 20 participants considered elementary, middle, and high school teachers as influential in their choice. Nine of these were foreign language majors who extolled their middle and high school teachers as inspirational in their degree selection. Of the five participants in the group majoring in fields other than foreign language who lauded their middle and high school teachers, three also gave credit to the programs in which these teachers participated.

### ***New Findings***

Although interpersonal relationships as influential in degree choice factored into this case study as an *a priori* theme, the specific role of college personnel as a part of this relational group was not part of the reviewed literature. The results of this study demonstrate that interpersonal relationships between students and college personnel are influential in degree choice. Specifically, the findings indicate that academic advisors and professors played a role in the students' choice of major. However, according to the participants, admission counselors played no part in their choice. The four students who recognized the influence of a professor or an academic advisor as persuasive were in the group of participants majoring in subjects other than foreign language.

Another area in which this case study revealed new perspectives regards the influence of middle and high school programs on major choice. While a small number of studies in the review of literature mentioned teachers preceding college entry as having some degree of influence on choice, none of the studies considered middle and high school programs as potential factors. Contrastingly, nine of the 20 participants in this study specified the influential impact of these programs on their choice of major. Furthermore, in some cases, the participants' intrinsic motivation/passion which influenced their choice of major could be traced initially to these programs. Specifically, two of the foreign language majors' passion began as the result of school-sponsored trips abroad. And among the participants majoring in a field other than foreign language, four indicated their interest, or passion, for the subject had developed from their participation in school-sponsored career programs, school-sponsored summer camps, and/or community programs. Thus, the findings of this study point to the prevalent and influential impact of middle and high school programs on major choice.

### ***Summary of Findings Compared to Reviewed Literature***

Only the *a priori* themes of intrinsic motivation and economic considerations as influential factors in major choice aligned with the literature reviewed. The interpersonal relationships cited by previous studies as influential did not extend to this study. Whereas the literature cited the relational influence of family and peers in the selection of a college major and gave little attention to the influence of K-12 teachers, this study revealed the opposite. None of the participants related their degree choice to family influence, and only one participant mentioned a peer as peripherally influential. However, 14 of the 20 participants in this study cited elementary, middle, and high school teachers as inspirational and influential in the choice of major. Furthermore, the reviewed literature did not discuss the relational influence of university personnel. However, this study revealed that university personnel played a minor role

in the selection of a major with four of the 20 participants crediting academic advisors and professors as persuasive in their choice.

Additionally, the review of literature did not include middle and high school programs as an influential factor as students consider what major to choose. By contrast, the findings of this study were strong enough to support this variable as an emerging theme with nine of the 20 participants asserting the substantial influence of these programs on their degree choice.

### ***Limitations of Findings Compared to Reviewed Literature***

When looking at the findings of this case study in comparison to the findings of the reviewed literature, context is essential. Qualitative studies generally focus on events and situations which are essentially context specific and limit generalizations (Spencer et al., 2003). The review of literature covers many studies and thousands of participants, whereas the findings of this study are the result of interviews from a purposeful sampling of 20 participants at a small, private, Midwestern university. Additionally, the body of literature does not focus on foreign language as a major choice but rather focuses on major choice in general, whereas this study concentrates on major choice as it affects foreign language study. It is assumed that the findings from this study will be utilized to address the decline in foreign language majors at this particular university with transferability essentially limited to universities within the United States of approximately the same size. These determinants were appropriately acknowledged and sufficiently discussed in the limitations, delimitations, and assumptions sections of Chapter 3.

### **Implications of the Findings for Practice**

The desired outcome of this present research is to communicate to the foreign language department at a small, private, Midwestern university the factors most influential in choosing a major, from the students' perspective, and to explore these findings to strengthen the world language program through improved recruitment and the implementation of expanded curricular and pedagogical approaches. Additional expectations of this study are to add to the body of

literature concerning the way in which students choose their major and to add to the knowledge base for practitioners in the field of foreign language.

Concerning the factors that influence a student's choice of major, the findings from this study indicate that parents and other family members have no direct influence. However, in some instances, issues within the family, such as injuries and illness, impacted students and initiated or strengthened their intrinsic interest or passion for a particular field of study. Students reported that their parents would be supportive of any choice they made. These factors imply that outreach to parents as a way to recruit foreign language majors, and thereby strengthen the foreign language program, should not be considered a priority.

Additionally, peer influence was not an influential factor in the choice of major in this case study. Only one participant mentioned a peer as peripherally influential. However, this "peer" was not a friend or companion but rather a university student ambassador of approximately the same age who encouraged the student to finalize the choice she was already considering. Students reported that, although peers did not shape their choice of major, the interaction with peers who have the same academic interest makes classes in their major more enjoyable. These findings imply that creating opportunities for activities that encourage the formation of relationships among classmates who have already chosen a foreign language major would make classes more pleasurable and thus would incentivize students to retain their major. Fun activities could also encourage elementary and intermediate-level foreign language students to continue their studies and declare a major. These findings suggest the need for activities outside the classroom. Such activities could include foreign language clubs that meet on a regular basis; periodic discussion groups that include native speakers for "informal talk time;" lectures with native speakers as presenters followed by a social hour; movie nights; parties to celebrate culturally-based holidays; field trips, for example, to zoos, museums, restaurants, amusement parks, and ice-skating rinks; outdoor activities, including nature walks,

camping, kayaking, canoeing, skiing, and scavenger hunts; cultural performances, such as symphony concerts and plays; and sporting events. Taking advantage of these opportunities to interact using the foreign language as opposed to English should be emphasized.

In this study, university personnel were nominally influential in major choice. Among the 20 participants, two cited professors and two cited academic advisors as influencing their choice. Perhaps more important than the affirmative role that academic advisors and professors play in influencing students in their choice of major is the nullifying role they play, as reported by the interview participants, by not encouraging foreign language as an additional major. Accordingly, the implications regarding university personnel are addressed later in the discussion of interdisciplinary collaboration as a way to strengthen the foreign language program.

It is important to note that none of the students who cited university personnel as influential in their degree choice were foreign language majors. Rather, all of the foreign language majors stated they had determined their major before enrolling at the university. Nine of these ten foreign language majors spoke of their love of language and their decision to major in foreign language as attributable in large part to their middle and high school teachers. This strong response implies the need for the university's foreign language department to reach out and collaborate with K-12 teachers in the surrounding communities. For example, professors could volunteer to occasionally co-teach certain classes, perhaps using parallel or alternative approaches.

In conjunction with the findings indicating the substantial influence of K-12 teachers on the choice of major, this study also revealed the importance of middle and high school programs on eventual degree choice. Nine out of the 20 students reflected on the importance of these programs. Some of these programs are career-oriented and thus incorporate the factor of economic considerations in major choice. In this study, 14 of the 20 participants asserted

economic considerations were important to some degree. Most said they were only of minor importance while four students declared economic considerations as definitely important. The fact that half of the participants majoring in a subject other than foreign language asserted that these middle and high school programs, which often include economic considerations, had a decisive influence on their choice of major implies the need for the foreign language department to pursue a tangible presence in these courses. Outreach on the part of the foreign language faculty to establish relationships with the middle and high school teachers could result in opportunities to speak with the students regarding the importance of world languages in their career choices and to institute a departmental representation in these tracks and lanes.

The findings of this study demonstrate that intrinsic interest, or passion, for a subject was the overwhelming influence in the choice of major. Eight out of 10 in the group of foreign language majors, as well as eight out of 10 in the group of students majoring in subjects other than foreign language, emphasized this factor in their degree choice with half of these students relating that their passion stemmed from a desire to help others. When speaking of their anticipated careers, the responses of these 16 participants again focused on intrinsic interest and the desire to help others as their motivation. Because interests often develop at a very early age and because, according to this study, K-12 teachers, as well as middle and high school programs, play an influential role in the selection of an eventual major, the foreign language department needs to develop a working relationship with local teachers and with school administrators. Attention to the implications of working across institutions is critical. The university's foreign language professors should propose and lead organizational partnerships with school administrators.

With regard to suggestions for strengthening the foreign language program at this small university, the participants' responses emphasized college curriculum and pedagogy as well as departmental outreach. The foreign language majors and those majoring in other fields asserted

the need for an interdisciplinary approach with a focus on careers. Participants cited the difficulty in acquiring the necessary courses to major in a foreign language due to scheduling conflicts with their other classes. Those majoring in fields other than foreign language also stated that their professors and advisors did not mention the benefits of combining their major with a foreign language major. Moreover, in some cases the professors and advisors stressed the difficulty in scheduling and the added time commitment that coupling a foreign language major would create.

These findings imply the need for cooperation among departments in terms of advising students and in terms of curricula development. An example of such collaboration might involve a double major combining the university's environmental studies program with German. The double major is logical since Germany is a leader in environmental policies. This alliance would permit students to establish connections between disciplines and to establish contacts with German speakers in the local community and in the virtual world. These contacts could lead to internships abroad and opportunities for employment. An additional implication worthy of pursuit entails collaboration between the business department, which encourages study abroad, and the foreign language department. Namely, courses could be developed to allow students to earn dual credits, thus facilitating a double major. Another suggestion is the addition of career-focused foreign language course offerings linked to specific majors. These courses, as recommended by the participants, should also include an exploratory class introducing all the languages taught at the university with a focus on careers related to each.

When offering suggestions to strengthen the foreign language program, the participants, especially those majoring in subjects other than world languages, cited the need for better outreach to middle and high schools to convey the importance of foreign language as well as what the university's foreign language program has to offer. As recommendations for middle



and high school programs, the participants identified school-sponsored institutes, summer camps, trips abroad, and community programs as well as the previously discussed career-oriented tracks and lanes. Thus, the participants' comments imply the need for the university's foreign language department to work cooperatively with local businesses, health care providers, and non-profit agencies to organize institutes and summer camps as well as to work cooperatively with the local school administration to integrate foreign language into the K-12 career education programs. Moreover, as an outreach approach, the foreign language professors could organize and lead trips abroad for middle and high school students as well as for college students.

Continuing with the theme of curriculum and pedagogy, the foreign language majors emphasized conversation as a methodology to draw and maintain majors. They stressed the need for conversational opportunities both in and out of the classroom and for study abroad opportunities. Their observations imply a variety of curricular and pedagogical approaches. First, every foreign language course, to the extent possible, should incorporate fun classroom activities in which to use the language, should invite native speakers from campus and/or the surrounding community to interact with students during classes, and should include field trips and cultural events. Second, the department should collaborate with local schools to develop a K-12 tutoring program so that foreign language majors can share their competencies as well as their career interests while tutoring and conversing with those students learning English and with native English-speaking students learning a foreign language. This tutoring partnership would provide foreign language majors the opportunity to increase their communication skills while indirectly promoting the university's foreign language program. Third, the foreign language department should contact local businesses and community organizations in an effort to acquire funding for study abroad scholarships for all world language majors. Fourth, the department should also research local needs and connect with community groups to coordinate service-

learning opportunities. This community-based learning in upper-level classes would provide opportunities for student research to address community needs. Moreover, because service-learning courses can generate student interest and motivate students to continue their language studies (Carney, 2013), and because several participants in this study asserted a desire to help others as a powerful factor in their choice of major, *all levels* of foreign language courses should contain a community-based component.

To summarize, in this case study, four variables represent the most influential factors in choosing a major. In ascending order of frequency, these factors include middle and high school programs, K-12 teachers, economic considerations, and intrinsic interest or passion for the subject matter. Thus, the major implication and takeaway from the research is the need to create a passion for world language learning within students at an early age through outreach to K-12 teachers and school administrators in the surrounding communities. This outreach will give the university's foreign language professors an opportunity to explain and promote the importance of world languages and what this university has to offer its students. The outreach will also provide an opportunity to gain a presence in the career-oriented middle and high school programs and to relate the economic advantages of bilingualism. An additional, important implication of this research centers on students as a valuable resource. The thought-provoking ideas and suggestions from the 20 participants in this study imply the need for the foreign language faculty to systematically survey world language students in beginning, intermediate, and advanced courses to explore their suggestions as potentially effective curricular and pedagogical strategies.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

Due to the nature of qualitative methodology and case studies, qualitative researchers are routinely reluctant to generalize from one case to another because of the contextual variations between cases (Creswell, 1998). However, according to Patton (2015), the potential

for transferability exists “from particular cases to others based on similarity of context and conditions” (p. 719). Because external validity, stemming from the research design, was established, and because this case study takes place at a small, private university; the findings are transferable to other small, private universities within the United States. In this study, the findings identify factors influencing the choice of college majors and, in particular, those factors influencing the choice of foreign language as a major. Additionally, the study explores initiatives to strengthen the foreign language program at a fully accredited, private, liberal arts and sciences university in the Midwest. These findings can be adapted to similar settings; however, as stated by Lincoln and Guba (1985), the adaptability must be determined by “the person seeking to make an application elsewhere. The original inquirer cannot know the sites to which transferability might be sought, but the appliers can and do” (p. 298).

Although transferability of the findings to other similar universities is possible, it is recommended that comparable universities develop corresponding studies regarding factors that influence the choice of major. In such manner, they can evoke from their own student body the subjective impressions of the teaching-learning process and consequently integrate those recommendations and suggestions to shape their particular foreign language curriculum.

A mixed methods research design using a survey questionnaire is a recommended approach for additional research. Descriptive-survey research aims to collect data that demonstrate the extent to which the variables in the study affect the participants (Fowler, 2014). The use of an easily replicated survey employing a five-point Likert scale ranging from “Not at all influential” to “Extremely influential” would provide quantitative data which could be analyzed to gain deeper insight into the *extent* to which the variables of interpersonal relationships, middle and high school programs, economic influence, intrinsic motivation, and curricular content and pedagogy affect a student’s choice of major.

Even though the influence of university personnel was minor in this study with only four out of 20 students citing this factor as relevant in determining their major, the topic is worthy of more research. First, a gap exists in the literature because this theme has not been explored. Secondly, understanding the techniques in advertising used by recruitment officials and the thought processes used by admission counselors as they attempt to match prospective students to appropriate departments would be helpful in regard to attracting majors and strengthening foreign language programs. This information could be gained through interviews and focus groups with university personnel. Furthermore, studies could examine the themes occurring in the material used for recruitment and what these publications promote.

Another idea worth pursuing is a longitudinal study. This research would follow up with the students after graduation to ascertain their degree of contentment with their choice of major and career. Such a study could investigate whether those students who chose not to major in a foreign language feel that adding a foreign language major would have been beneficial in boosting job prospects and /or providing opportunities for growth in their existing employment.

An additional recommended approach for further study is the investigation of influential factors in the choice of major from a demographic standpoint. Such research could focus on gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, student residency, and parents' educational level. Comparisons of these demographic characteristics and the relationship of these groups in regard to each of the influential themes in the choice of major could provide helpful direction for foreign language programs with respect to recruiting, developing responsive curricula, and maintaining foreign language majors.

A final recommendation is a study on the influence of technology in the choice of foreign language as a major. This research would examine social technologies, blogs, Instagram, Tic Toc, chats, webinars, webcasts, Skype, Zoom, etc., as ways to connect individual students and

entire classrooms to native speakers. Such a study could investigate the effectiveness of virtual exchanges and partnerships with professors and classrooms in the target culture. Research comparing modes of instructional delivery and their effect on interactions among class peers, the local community, and international students could conceivably result in greater student interest, greater student participation, and creative changes to curricula and pedagogy that would attract and retain foreign language majors.

### **Conclusion**

This qualitative case study examined how and why college students choose their major with a particular focus on how and why college students choose a foreign language major. The theoretical framework was the student choice construct as derived from social constructivism, which posits that knowledge and meaning are subjective and created through social interactions. The purpose of this study was to investigate the decline in foreign language majors at a small, private, Midwestern university by identifying factors influencing the choice of college majors and exploring initiatives to strengthen the foreign language program. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews via Zoom with 20 world language students, 10 of whom were majoring in foreign language and 10 of whom were enrolled in entry-level foreign language classes but were majoring in fields other than foreign language. Specifically, the study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What factors influence students to choose a foreign language major?
2. What factors influence students to choose majors other than a foreign language?
3. Are there differences and similarities in the factors influencing major choice identified by students majoring in a foreign language and those not majoring in a foreign language?
4. What initiatives do students suggest as ways to strengthen the foreign language program?

To answer these research questions, key variables cited in the body of literature as influential in the choice of major were used to structure the interview. These four *a priori* factors included interpersonal relationships, intrinsic interest or passion, economic outcomes, and college curriculum and pedagogy. Additionally, middle and high school programs emerged from the interviews as a fifth influential factor in the choice of college major.

Subthemes also developed from the data analysis. The desire to help others emanated as a subtheme related to intrinsic interest. Interdisciplinary collaboration focusing on careers, opportunities for conversation, and community-based learning emerged as subthemes associated with college curriculum and pedagogy. And departmental outreach evolved as a subtheme related to middle and high school programs.

The results of the data analysis demonstrated that the factors influencing students to choose a foreign language as a major and the factors influencing students to choose majors other than a foreign language were for the most part similar with only two notable differences. First, university personnel were not an influential factor with foreign language majors but played a role in four out of 10 students who chose majors in other subjects. Secondly, K-12 teachers were a compelling factor for nine of the 10 foreign language majors while only five of the 10 students majoring in fields other than foreign language reported K-12 teachers as influential in their major choice.

The findings revealed economic considerations as a factor in the decision-making process among 7 of the 10 participants in both interview groups. However, the majority of the participants maintained that these considerations were of nominal importance. Only one of the participants majoring in foreign language and three of the participants majoring in other fields declared economic considerations as a significant determinant in their degree choice.

The variable most often cited as influential in choosing a major was intrinsic interest. Specifically, 16 of the 20 participants, evenly divided between the two interview groups,

stressed intrinsic interest as a pivotal factor in their choice of major. Moreover, half of these students specified a desire to help others as the root cause of their motivation. Of all the factors deemed influential in choosing a major, intrinsic interest evoked the longest subjective responses and the most positive and sincere testimonials from the participants.

In closing, this case study adds to the body of literature on how college students choose their major and addresses the gap in the literature by providing information on how foreign language students in particular choose their major. The findings of this research indicate little difference and great similarity in the factors identified as influential in the choice of a college major among students majoring in a foreign language and those majoring in other fields at the small, private, Midwestern university where the research took place. Overall, the findings contribute constructive insight into the themes associated with the choice of major and provide implications for future actions and policies with the potential to strengthen the foreign language program and reverse the decline in foreign language majors at this research site. Lastly, although qualitative studies do not lend themselves to generalizations, the insights gained from this study may inform strategies to fortify foreign language programs at comparable universities and may also encourage similar studies tailored to the specific needs of comparable universities.

### References

- Acosta, M. M., & Duggins, S. (2018). Community-based literacy learning spaces as counterhegemonic figured worlds for African American readers. *Reading Horizons*, 57(3), 49–67.
- Adya, M., & Kaiser, K. M. (2005). Early determinants of women in the IT workforce: A model of girls' career choices. *Information Technology & People*, (18)3, 230-259.  
<https://doi.org/10.1108/09593840510615860>

- Arcidiacono, P. (2004). Ability sorting and the returns to college major. *Journal of Econometrics*, 121(01), 343-375. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeconom.2003.10.010>
- Arcidiacono, P., & Nicholson, S. (2005). Peer effects in medical school. *Journal of Public Economics*, 89(2-3), 327-350. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2003.10.006>
- Atitsogbui, E.M. (2014). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors that influence students' interest in critical languages learning [Doctoral Dissertation, North Dakota State University of Agriculture and Applied Science]. <https://library.ndsu.edu/ir/handle/10365/27294>
- Awad, G. (2014). Motivation, persistence, and crosscultural awareness: A study of college students learning foreign languages. *Academy of Educational Leadership Journal*, 18(4), 97–116. \_\_\_\_\_
- Bandura, A. (1977). Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. *Psychological Review*, 84(2), 191–215. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.84.2.191>
- Bhattacharya, K. (2017). *Fundamentals of qualitative research: A practical guide*. Routledge.
- Beggs, J. M., Bantham, J. H., & Taylor, S. (2008). Distinguishing the factors influencing college students' choice of major. *College Student Journal*, 42(2), 381-394.
- Bourdieu, P. (1993). *The field of cultural production*. Columbia University Press.
- Bøyum, S. (2007). Philosophy and language learning. *Studies in Philosophy & Education*, 26(1), 43-56. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-006-9013-3>
- Bravo-Moreno, A. (2003). Power games between the researcher and the participant in the social inquiry. *The Qualitative Report*, 8(4), 624-639.
- Brecht, R. D., & Rivers, W. P. (2000). *Language and National Security in the 21st Century: The role of Title VI/Fulbright-Hays in supporting national language capacity*. Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company. <https://eric.ed.gov/contentdelivery/servlet/ERICServlet?accno=ED445516>



- Burton, K. D., Lydon, J. E., D'Alessandro, D. U., & Koestner, R. (2006). The differential effects of intrinsic and identified motivation on well-being and performance: Prospective, experimental, and implicit approaches to self-determination theory. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 91(4), 750-762. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.91.4.750>
- Busse, V., & Walter, C. (2013) Foreign language learning motivation in higher education: A longitudinal study of motivational changes and their causes. *The Modern Language Journal*, (97)2, 435-456. <http://www.jstor.com/stable/43651648>
- Cabrera, A. F., & La Nasa, S.M. (2000). Understanding the college-choice process. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, 2000(107), 5-22. <https://doi:10.1002/ir.10701>
- Carney, T. M. (2013). How service-learning in Spanish speaks to the crisis in the humanities. *Hispania*, 96(2), 229–237. <https://doi.org/10.1353/hpn.2013.0035>
- Carnevale, A. P., Cheah, B., & Strohl, J. (2013). Hard times: College majors, unemployment and earnings: Not all college degrees are created equal. Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 17. <https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/>
- Choukas-Bradley, S., Cohen, G., Giletta, M., & Prinstein, M. J. (2015). Peer influence, peer status, and prosocial behavior: An experimental investigation of peer socialization of adolescents' intentions to volunteer. *Journal of Youth & Adolescence*, 44(12), 2197–2210. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-015-0373-2>
- Clark, C., Vickers, D., Aron, S., Osterud, N., & Merrill, M. (1994). The transition to capitalism in America: A panel discussion. *The History Teacher*, 27(3), 263-288. <http://doi:10.2307/494769>
- Couto Costa, R. (2019). The place of the humanities in today's knowledge society. *Palgrave Communications*, 5(1), 1-5. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-019-0245-6>

- Crouch, M., & McKenzie, H. (2006). The logic of small samples in interview-based qualitative research. *Social Science Information*, 45(4), 18.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0539018406069584>
- Creswell, J. W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Sage Publications.
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Curtain, H. (1990). *Foreign language learning: an early start*. ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics Washington D.C. <https://www.ericdigests.org/pre-9218/start.htm>
- D'Agruma, G., & Hardy, J. T. (1997). Foreign languages and cross-cultural knowledge: A survey of their importance as perceived by human resources departments of Ohio's international businesses. *Foreign Language Annals*, 30(1), 38–48.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1944-9720.1997.tb01315.x>
- Damari, R. R., Rivers, W. P., Brecht, R. D., Gardner, P., Pulupa, C., & Robinson, J. (2017). The demand for multilingual human capital in the U.S. labor market. *Foreign Language Annals*, 50(1), 13–37. <https://doi.org/10.1111/flan.12241>
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The "what" and "why" of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Inquiry*, 11(4), 227-268.  
[http://doi.org/10.1207/S15327965PLI1104\\_01](http://doi.org/10.1207/S15327965PLI1104_01)
- DeMarie, D., & Aloise-Young, P.A. (2003). College students' interest in their major. *College Student Journal*, 37(3), 462-469.
- Dewey, D. (1907). *The School and Social Progress*. University of Chicago Press.
- Dornyei, Z., & Ushioda, E. (2011). *Teaching and Researching Motivation* (2nd ed.). Pearson Education Ltd.

- Douvan, E. (1976). The role of models in women's professional development. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 1(1), 5–20.
- Dwyer, S. C., & Buckle, J. L. (2009). The space between: On being an insider-outsider in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 8(1), 54–63.
- England, P., & Li, S., (2006). Desegregation stalled: The changing gender composition of college majors, 1971-2002. *Gender & Society*, 20(5), 657-677. <https://doi-org.lib-roxy.usi.edu/10.1177/0891243206290753>
- Fact Book. (2003-04). *University of Evansville*, Evansville, IN.
- Fact Book. (2020-21). *University of Evansville*, Evansville, IN.
- Fowler, F., Jr. (2014). *Survey Research Methods* (5th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Fox, R., Corretjer O., Webb K., & Tian J. (2019). Benefits of foreign language learning and bilingualism: An analysis of published empirical research 2005–2011. *Foreign Language Annals*, 52(3), 470–490. <https://doi.org/10.1111/flan.12418>
- Freire, P. (1973). *Education for critical consciousness*. Seabury Press.
- Gardner, R. C. (1985). *Social psychology and second language learning: The role of attitudes and motivation*. Edward Arnold.
- Gardner, R.C., & Lambert, W.E. (1959). Motivational variables in second-language acquisition. *Canadian Journal of Psychology*, 13(4), 266-272.
- Gavian, R. W., & Nanassy, L. C. (1955). Economic competence as a goal of elementary-school education. *The Elementary School Journal*, 55(5), 270-273.
- George-Paschal, L., Hawkins, A., & Graybeal, L.M. (2019). Investigating the overlapping experiences and impacts of service-learning: Juxtaposing perspectives of students, faculty, and community partners. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 25(2), 43-61. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mjcsloa.3239521.0025.203>

- Gerring, J. (2004). What is a case study and what is it good for? *American Political Science Review*, 98(2), 341-354. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055404001182>
- Gerring, J. (2006). Single-outcome studies: A methodological primer. *International Sociology*, 21(5), 707-734. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0268580906067837>
- Glaser B. G., & Strauss A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory*. Aldine.
- Gosling, S. D., John, O. P., Craik, K. H., & Robins, R. W. (1998). Do people know how they behave? Self-reported act frequencies compared with on-line codings by observers. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 74(5), 1337-1349.
- Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods*, 18(1), 59–82. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X05279903>
- Hagedorn, L. S., Nora, A., & Pascarella, E. T. (1996). Preoccupational segregation among first-year college students: An application of the Duncan dissimilarity index. *Journal of College Student Development*, 37(4), 425–437.
- Hamayan, E. (1986). The need for foreign language competence in the United States. *ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics*. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED276304.pdf>
- Hartnett, R. T., & Centra, J. A. (1977). The effects of academic departments on student learning. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 48(5), 491–507. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.1977.11776570>
- Järvensivu, T., & Törnroos, J. Å. (2010). Case study research with moderate constructionism: Conceptualization and practical illustration. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 39(1), 100–108.
- Johnson, S. D. (1995). Will our research hold up under scrutiny? *Journal of Industrial Teacher Education*, 32(3), 3-6.

- Jones, S. R., & Abes, E. S. (2004). Enduring influences of service-learning on college students' identity development. *Journal of College Student Development, 45*(2), 149–166.  
<https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2004.0023>
- Jootun, D., McGhee, G., & Marland, G. (2009). Reflexivity: Promoting rigour in qualitative research. *Nursing Standard, 23*(23), 42-46.
- Keen, C., & Hall, K. (2009). Engaging with difference matters: Longitudinal student outcomes of co-curricular service-learning programs. *Journal of Higher Education, 80*(1), 59-79.  
<https://doi.org/10.1353/jhe.0.0037>
- Kimweli, D.M.S., & Richards, A.G. (1999). Choice of a major and students' appreciation of their major. *College Student Journal, 33*(1), 16-26.
- Kuntz, A.M., Gildersleeve, R.E. & Pasque, P.A. (2011). Obama's American Graduation Initiative: Race, Conservative Modernization, and a Logic of Abstraction. *Peabody Journal of Education, 86*(5), 488-505. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2011.616130>
- Laverty, M. (2015). “There is no substitute for a sense of reality”: Humanizing the humanities. *Educational Theory, 65*(6), 635-654. <https://doi.org/10.1111/edth.12139>
- Lambert, R. D. (1985). Foreign language instruction: A national agenda. *Foreign Language Annals, 18*(5), 379–383. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1944-9720.1985.tb00969.x>
- Leppel, K., Williams, M.L. & Waldauer, C. (2001). The impact of parental occupation and socioeconomic on choice of college major. *Journal of Family and Economic Issues, 22*(4), 373. <https://doi-org.lib-proxy.usi.edu/10.1023/A:1012716828901>
- Levy, J. S. (2008). Case studies: Types, designs, and logics of inference', *Conflict Management and Peace Science, 25*(1), 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07388940701860318>
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lodico, M. G., Spaulding, D. T., & Voegtler, K. H. (2010). *Methods in educational research: From theory to practice* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.

- Long, M. C., Goldhaber, D., & Huntington-Klein, N. (2015). Do completed college majors respond to changes in wages? *Economics of Education Review*, 49(1), 1-14.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2015.07.007>
- Looney, D., & Lusin, N. (2019). *Enrollments in Languages Other Than English in United States Institutions of Higher Education, Summer 2016 and Fall 2016: Final Report*.  
<http://www.mla.org>
- Lyle, D. S. (2007). Estimating and interpreting peer and role model deficits from randomly assigned social groups at west point. *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, 89(2), 289–299. <https://doi.org/10.1162/rest.89.2.289>
- Ma, Y. (2009). Family socioeconomic status, parental involvement, and college major choices-- gender, race/ethnic, and nativity patterns. *Sociological Perspectives*, 52(2), 211-234.  
<https://doi.org/10.1525/sop.2009.52.2.211>
- Ma, Y. (2011). College major choice, occupational structure and demographic patterning by gender, race and nativity. *Social Science Journal*, 48(1), 112-129.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.soscij.2010.05.004>
- Malgwi, C.A., Howe, M.A., & Burnaby, P.A. (2005). Influences on Students' Choice of College Major. *Journal of Education for Business*, 80(5), 275-282.  
<https://doi.org/10.3200/JOEB.80.5.275-282>
- Malin, J., Bragg, D., & Hackmann, D. (2017). College and career readiness and the every student succeeds act. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 53(5), 809-838.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X17714845>
- Manzo, K.K. (2008). Analysis finds time stolen from other subjects for math, reading. *Education Week*, 27(25), 6.

- Maoz, Z. (2002). Case study methodology in international studies: From storytelling to hypothesis testing. In F. P. Harvey & M. Brecher (Eds.), *Evaluating methodology in international studies* (pp. 161-186). University of Michigan Press.
- Maxwell, J. (2005). *Qualitative Research Design: An interactive approach*. Sage Publications.
- McDill, E., & Coleman, J. (1965). Family and peer influences in college plans of high school students. *Sociology of Education*, 38(2), 112-126. <https://doi:10.2307/2112194>
- McKinney, RW. (2017). *The optimal balance of liberal education and career readiness in the context of the American Promise: A critical analysis of the American Association of Colleges and Universities liberal education and America 's Promise challenge* (Publication No. 10272952) [Doctoral Dissertation, University of Louisiana at Lafayette]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.
- Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. Jossey-Bass.
- Modern Language Association. (2007). *Foreign languages and higher education: New structures for a changed world*. <http://www.mla.org>
- Moeller, A.J., & Abbot, M.G. (2018). Creating a new normal: Language education for all. *Foreign Language Annals*, (51)1, 12-23. <https://doi.org/10.1111/flan.12310>
- Moeller, A. J. & Catalano, T. (2015). Foreign Language Teaching and Learning. *Faculty Publications: Department of Teaching, Learning and Teacher Education*, 327-332. <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/teachlearnfacpub/196>
- Montmarquette, C., Cannings, K., & Mahseredjian, S. (2002). How do young people choose college majors? *Economics of Education Review*, 21(6), 543-556. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0272-7757\(01\)00054-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0272-7757(01)00054-1)

- Moore, J. L., & Cruce, T. M. (2020). The impact of an interest-major fit signal on college major certainty. *Research in Higher Education*, 61(3), 383–407. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-019-09560-0>
- Obama, B. (2009). *Remarks at Macomb Community College in Warren, Michigan*. The American Presidency Project. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu>
- Orlikowski, W. J., & Baroudi, J. J. (1991). Studying information technology in organizations: Research approaches and assumptions. *Information Systems Research*, 2(1), 1–84. <https://doi.org/10.1287/isre.2.1.1>
- Palinkas, L. A., Horwitz, S. M., Green, C. A., Wisdom, J. P., Duan, N., & Hoagwood, K. (2015). Purposeful Sampling for Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis in Mixed Method Implementation Research. *Administration and policy in mental health*, 42(5), 533–544. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-013-0528-y>
- Pascarella, E. T., Ethington, C. A., & Smart, J. C. (1988). The influence of college on humanitarian/civic involvement values. *Journal of Higher Education*, 59(4), 412–437.
- Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (1991). *How college affects students: Findings and insights from twenty years of research*. Josey-Bass.
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Sage Publications.
- Paulsen, M. B. (1990). *College choice: Understanding student enrollment behavior*. ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report No. 6. Washington, DC: The George Washington University. <https://eric.ed.gov/contentdelivery/servlet/ERICServlet?accno=ED333855>
- Paulsen, M. B., & St. John, E. P. (1997). The financial nexus between college choice and persistence. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, 1997(95), 65–82. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ir.9504>



- Paulsen, M. B., & St. John, E. P. (2002). Social class and college costs: Examining the financial nexus between college choice and persistence. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 73(2), 189-236. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2002.11777141>
- Pearson, C., & Dellman-Jenkins, M. (1997). Parental influence on a student's selection of a college major. *College Student Journal*, 31(3), 301-314.
- Perkins, J.A. (1979). Report of the President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies. *Foreign Language Annals*, 12(6), 457-464. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1944-9720.1979.tb00210.x>
- Perna, L. W. (2006). Studying college access and choice: A proposed conceptual model. In J. Smart (Ed.), *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research*, (pp. 99-157). Agathon Press.
- Polachek, S.W. (1978). Sex differences in college major. *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, 31(4), 498-508. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001979397803100406>
- Porter, S. R., & Umbach, P. D. (2006). College major choice: An analysis of person-environment fit. *Research in Higher Education*, 47(4), 429-449. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-005-9002-3>
- Pufahl, I., & Rhodes, N.C. (2011). Foreign language instruction in U.S. schools: Results of a national survey. *Foreign Language Annals*, 44(2), 258-288.
- Pulliam, J.D. (1991). *History of education in America*. Macmillan Publishing Company.
- Ramage, K. (1990). Motivational factors and persistence in foreign language study. *Language Learning*, 40(2), 189-219.
- Ravitch, D. (1990). Education in the 1980's: A concern for 'quality' promising education trends offer a foundation for growth. *Education Week*, 9(16), 48. <http://www.edweek.org>

- Roese, N. J., & Summerville, A. (2005). What we regret most... And why. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 31(9), 1273–1285.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167205274693>
- Ryan, G., & Bernard, R. (2003). Techniques to identify themes. *Field Methods*, 15(1), 85-109.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X02239569>
- Sacerdote, B. (2001). Peer effects with random assignment: results for Dartmouth roommates. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 116(2), 681–704.
- St. John, E. P., Asker, E. H., & Hu, S. (2001). The role of finances in student choice: A review of theory and research. In M. Paulsen & J. Smart (Eds.), *The finance of higher education: Theory, research, policy & practice* (pp. 419-438). Agathon Press.
- St. John, E. P., Hu, S., Simmons, A., Carter, D. F., & Weber, J. (2004). What difference does a major make? The influence of college major field on persistence by African American and White students. *Research in Higher Education*, 45(3), 209–232.
- St. John, E. P., Paulsen, M. B., & Starkey, J. B. (1996). The nexus between college choice and persistence. *Research in Higher Education*, 37(2), 175-220.
- Simpson, J. C. (2001). Segregated by subject: Racial differences in the factors influencing academic major between European Americans, Asian Americans, and African, Hispanic, and Native Americans. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 72(1), 63-100. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2001.11778865>
- Shapiro C. A, & Sax, L.J. (2011). Major selection and persistence for women in STEM. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, 2011(152), 5-8. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ir.404>
- Smith, L.B. (2000), *The socialization of females with regard to a technology-related career: recommendation for change*. (ED450213) ERIC. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED450213>

- Sonaik, O. A. (2007). Influence of high school counselors on the choices of universities and academic majors selected by students (Publication No. 3317515) [Doctoral Dissertation, Texas Southern University]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.
- Spencer, L., Ritchie, J., Lewis, J. & Dillon, L. (2003). *Quality in qualitative evaluation: A framework for assessing research evidence*. National Centre for Social Research.  
<https://www.cebma.org/wp-content/uploads/Spencer-Quality-in-qualitative-evaluation.pdf>
- Spencer, V. (2014). Democratic citizenship and the "crisis in humanities". *Humanities*, 3(3), 398-414. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h3030398>
- Stein-Smith, K. (2015). The U.S. foreign language deficit. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 6(4), 705-712. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17507/jltr.0604.01>
- Stein-Smith, K. (2019). Rethinking the role of languages in the US: Toward a more diverse cultural identity. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 10(3), 403-411.  
<https://doi.org/10.17507/jltr.1003.01>
- Theobald, P. (2016). *Education now: How rethinking America's past can change its future*. Routledge.
- Tochon, F. V. (2009). The key to global understanding: World languages education—Why schools need to adapt. *Review of Educational Research*, 18(2), 650-681.  
<https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654308325898>
- Toloie-Eshlaghy, A., Chitsaz, S., Karimian, L., & Charkhchi, R. (2011). A classification of qualitative research methods. *Research Journal of International Studies*, (20), 106-123.
- Trow, M. (1972). The expansion and transformation of higher education. *International Review of Education* 18(1), 61-84.
- Tsoukas, H. (1989). The validity of idiographic research explanations. *Academy of Management Review*, 14(4), 551-561. <https://doi.org/10.2307/258558>

- Vallerand, R. J., & Verner-Filion, J. (2013). Making people's life most worth living: On the importance of passion for positive psychology. *Terapia Psicológica*, 31(1), 35-48.
- Wilshire, B. (1990). *The moral collapse of the university: Professionalism, purity, and alienation*. State University of New York Press.
- Wiswall, M. & Zafar, B. (2015). Determinants of college major choice: Identification using an information experiment. *The Review of Economic Studies*, 82(2), 791-824.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/restud/rdu044>
- Wolgemuth, J.R., Hicks, T., & Agosto, V. (2017). Unpacking assumptions in research synthesis: A critical construct synthesis approach. *Educational Researcher*, 46(3), 131-139. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X17703946>
- Workman, J.L. (2015). Parental influence on exploratory students' college choice, major, and career decision making. *College Student Journal*, 49(1), 23-30.
- Wright, C. (2018). *Choose wisely: A study of college major choice and major switching behavior* [Doctoral Dissertation, Pardee RAND Graduate School].  
<https://doi.org/10.7249/RGSD414>
- Yin, R. K. (2003). *Case study research: Design and methods* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Yin, R. K. (2009). *Case study research: Design and methods* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Young, R. A., Valach, L., Ball, J., Paseluikho, M. A., Wong, Y. S., DeVries, R. J., McLean, H., & Turkel, H. (2001). Career development in adolescence as a family project. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 48(2), 190–202. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.48.2.190>
- Zemsky, R., Wegner, G. R., & William, F.M. (2005). *Remaking the American university: Market-smart and mission centered*. Rutgers University Press.

## **Appendix A: Semi-structured Interview Script**

### ***Review of purpose, interview procedure, and verbal consent***

It is (date/ time), and it is my pleasure to be interviewing a foreign language major/student whom I will refer to as pseudonym in order to keep the responses anonymous.

Before we officially begin, I first want to thank you for your willingness to take part in this study. Secondly, I want you to know that there are no right or wrong answers to any of these questions. The questions will be open-ended, so I want you to feel comfortable talking as long as you want and sharing as much as you would like about your personal experiences and your ideas. The interview will take approximately 40 minutes, but please don't feel pressured to hurry. We can stay as long as it takes.

I would also like to talk about the purpose of this study and the interview procedure. The purpose of the study is to investigate how college students choose their major by identifying the factors that influence this choice. In particular, the study seeks to identify how FL majors choose their majors in order to understand the decline in FL majors and explore initiatives to strengthen the foreign language program.

Regarding the interview procedure, do you confirm that you have agreed to be audio recorded to ensure accuracy of the interview transcription, which will be coded using no identifying markers and that you have been informed you can withdraw from the study by leaving the interview session at any time with no negative consequences? Additionally, do you confirm knowing that you will be given the opportunity to meet again to review the transcript of this interview? Do you confirm knowing that the audio recordings of the sessions will be downloaded to my password-protected computer and then will be saved on a media storage device and that the media storage device, paper transcriptions, and all notes will be secured in my office in a locked file cabinet for a maximum duration of 3 years and destroyed by April 2024.

Now, if you could respond to the following questions, then we can proceed with the interview.

1. Do you have any questions regarding the purpose or the procedure for the interview that we just reviewed?
2. Do you acknowledge that I have no grading relationship with you, in other words, you are not taking a class with me, and that you are not one of my advisees?
3. Do you give your verbal consent to continue with the audio-recorded interview?

***Participant General Information***

Let's get started with you telling me a bit about yourself.

1. How long have you been a student at this university?
2. When do you anticipate graduating?
3. What are you majoring in?
4. When did you first start studying or get interested in your major? (Elementary school, middle school, high school?)
5. To FL majors: Did you study any other language before deciding to concentrate on \_\_\_\_\_ (major language)?
6. To students majoring in a field other than foreign language: Did you study any foreign language previous to your first foreign language class at the university level?
7. To FL majors: At what level of \_\_\_\_ (major language) did you start when you entered the university? 100, 200, 300 or 400?

### Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. What factors influenced you in choosing your major? (Aligns to R.Q.1, R.Q. 2, R.Q. 3)

- a) Can you talk about peer influence as a factor in choosing your major?
- b) Can you talk about the influence of family in your choice of major?
- c) Can you talk about the influence of university personnel, such as admission counselors, academic advisors, and professors, as factors in choosing your major?
- d) Can you talk about the influence of grades school teachers, middle school teachers, high school teachers, or high school counselors in choosing your major?
- e) Can you reflect on intrinsic interest/passion as a factor in your choice of major?
- f) Can you talk about economic considerations, such as job availability, the chance of advancement, or salary levels, as a factor in choosing your major?

2. Can you tell me about the career path you will most likely pursue? (Aligns to R.Q.1, R.Q. 2, R.Q. 3)

3. What ideas can you suggest for strengthening the FL program? (Aligns to R.Q.4)

4. Do you have any thoughts that you would like to add before we conclude the interview?

(Aligns to R.Q.1, R.Q.2, R.Q.3, and/or R.Q. 4)