Often, when speaking to a student interested in applying to an MBA program—any MBA program—I find myself doing a bit of psychological counseling when we get to the undergraduate record evaluation. This is not necessarily because the student has a below-average UGPA, which sometimes is the case; no, what I find myself doing the most is arguing with the student as to the validity of their undergraduate major. Oftentimes, the first words out of a student’s mouth will be, “Okay, we need to do some damage control. I was an English major in college,” or “I know this is going to hurt me, but I was a psychology major.” These humanities, liberal arts, and social sciences students start committing academic hara-kiri before I even look at their transcripts. On the flip side, most students with economics, business, or business administration majors soar in to the process with an over-inflated sense of the merit of their academic credentials: “I know my GPA’s a little low, but I was a business major, so I’ve got that going for me.” Of course, this is not the case for all of my students, on either end of the spectrum—but I see this often enough that I thought it would be interesting to do a brief study and actually see if I could pinpoint that ever-ephemeral answer to the age-old MBA question: Which undergrad major or majors actually improve admissions chances—and which don’t?

What I found out was very interesting.

I started by obtaining the list of the 2009 top 20 ranked U.S. MBA programs as listed by U.S. News & World Report. I know that I’ve called into question the validity and/or usefulness of rankings in the past, but this provided a handy framework for my research. These are the schools:

#1 – Harvard  
#2 – Stanford  
#3 – Northwestern (Kellogg)  
#3 – UPenn (Wharton)  
#5 – MIT (Sloan)  
#5 – Chicago (Booth)  
#7 – UC Berkeley (Haas)  
#8 – Dartmouth (Tuck)  
#9 – Columbia  
#10 – Yale  
#11 – NYU (Stern)  
#12 – Duke (Fuqua)  
#13 – Michigan (Ross)  
#14 – UCLA (Anderson)  
#15 – Carnegie Mellon (Tepper)  
#15 – UVA (Darden)  
#17 – Cornell (Johnson)
Once I had my list in hand, I went to each of the schools’ websites, and pulled up the Class of 2011 entering class profiles for their full-time MBA programs. I printed each out, and spent an hour or so compiling the following data: undergraduate majors, median years of work experience, and number of undergraduate institutions represented. My goal was to do two things: (1) Find out which majors schools prefer, and (2) Determine whether a school’s penchant for a certain academic background could somehow trump the number of years of work experience preferred by a school. Except for a few notable exceptions (McDonough and Kenan-Flagler, who did not have their incoming class undergraduate majors available online), I was able to obtain the information I needed for this little admissions counseling experiment.

These were my results.

Most schools broke down their incoming class’ undergraduate major into three broad categories, which dealt with roughly the same academic backgrounds: Business/Business Administration/Economics, Engineering/Natural Sciences/Math/Technical Disciplines, and Humanities/Liberal Arts/Social Sciences. When averaged, this is what I found to be the percentage breakdown in accepted students for these schools’ incoming class of 2011:

- Business/Business Administration/Economics: 34%
- Engineering/Natural Sciences/Technical Disciplines/Math: 33%
- Humanities/Liberal Arts/Social Sciences: 25%

Before we analyze these very interesting results, I would like to point out some also very interesting exceptions to these averages. Far and wide, most schools seemed to hover around these averaged percentages. However:

- **Harvard Business School** had Humanities/Social Sciences at 40% of their incoming class, and Business Administration at 26%.
- **Stanford GSB** also placed a heavy preference on Humanities/Social Sciences, with a whopping 47% of their 2011 incoming class majoring in those fields. Business got the short end of the stick with a measly 17% of the pie.
- **Wharton** also leans towards Humanities/Social Sciences, giving them 42% of their slots; Business only got 24%.
- **MIT (Sloan)** likes Engineering/Math (44%) more than Business (20%).
- **NYU (Stern)** was interesting, because they had a pretty even distribution across the board: Business (26%), Social Sciences (20%), Economics (20%), Engineering/Math/Science (18%), and Humanities/Arts (16%) all had similar numbers.
- **Carnegie Mellon (Tepper)** was a shocker in its preference of science and engineering majors—50% of their 2011 class favored these disciplines. And, if you think that’s a chunk, it’s nothing compared to their 2010 class (57%), or their 2009 class (60%).
So, what did this very brief, bird’s-eye view of undergraduate majors teach us? Probably something we already knew: That what you major in doesn’t really matter quite as much as how you do in that major, and how difficult your classes are. It doesn’t matter if you majored in Business Administration with a minor in Economics, or if you instead chose to double-major in Literature and Art History. The numbers tell a story that might make those English majors among you rejoice (“Hooray! No more downplaying my senior thesis on the works of Emily Brontë!”) and might make those Business majors among you curse (“You mean all those nights I spent slaving over numerical minutia don’t give me an edge?!”) However, there is a deeper layer to these results than just the percentages—and this layer exists because there are no overwhelming undergraduate major preferences. This lack of disparity amongst the numbers begs the question—if it’s not a major schools are looking for, then what are they looking for? And that’s where my other data (and a little bit of thinking) came in.

All schools had the majority of their incoming class as having at least 3 years of full-time work experience, and the vast majority of them had the median number of years at 5. UCLA (Anderson) even had a chart of the functional titles of their incoming class: 50% were Senior Managers, 33% were Middle Managers, 10% were Corporate Officers, and 7% were Professionals. Combine this information with our undergraduate major information and, after a brief bit of analysis, this is where I ended up: MBA programs aren’t looking for majors, or even specializations—honestly (although they won’t ever say this out loud) they probably don’t even care what your major was, as long as your GPA is decent and your GMAT score is good. What they’re looking for are qualities. This becomes even more apparent when you analyze the many and varied fields that MBA candidates come from: high tech, entertainment, financial services, real estate, education, military, biotechnology, and consulting are just a few of them, and the list goes on for pages. The preference, it turns out, is that there is no preference. Create a listing of qualities from this academic and professional information, and this is what you come up with:

**Business majors** will likely exhibit these qualities (among others): intellectual ability, organizational skills, good written and oral skills, quantitative ability, and the ability to work with others.

**Engineering/Math majors** will likely exhibit these qualities (among others): intellectual and analytical ability, organizational skills, self-motivation, a highly developed quantitative ability, an increased capacity to problem-solve, and the ability to get things done individually and as a group.

**Humanities/Liberal Arts majors** will likely exhibit these qualities (among others): intellectual ability, imagination, creativity, good written and oral skills, a sense of humor, and self-motivation.

**Those with 3+ years of professional employment and success** will likely exhibit these qualities (among others): intellectual and analytical ability, organizational skills, good written and oral skills, the ability to work well with others, problem-solving skills, self-confidence, maturity, a sense of humor, and managerial potential.
What do you immediately notice as you’re reading these lists? There are certain qualities (intellectual ability, organizational skills, problem-solving skills, a sense of humor, for example) that repeat themselves over and over again. *This* is what business schools are looking for, and not an academic pedigree. Now, don’t get me wrong: a good academic pedigree never hurt anyone’s chances during the application process. However, a business degree is not the end-all-be-all during MBA admissions, and an English degree isn’t an application-killer. Graduating from a certain school doesn’t guarantee admission (the number of schools represented in an incoming class varied from 144 to 207), and a degree from a second-tier school isn’t going to harm your chances. It boils down to your personal characteristics, professional experience, and still-untapped growth potential, and how you present these two aspects to the admissions committee. Take my little admissions counseling experiment to heart: focus on *who* and *what* you are, and not *where* you’ve come from. Don’t simply rely on pedigrees, be they undergraduate majors, school names, or corporate titles. The numbers tell a refreshingly simple truth: Getting into a top MBA program isn’t an old-boy network of academic specializations or Fortune 100 credentials. Shine a spotlight on your personal potential, and that will dazzle admissions committees more than a 5-page résumé and transcript ever could.