

Research Brief

Understanding the Non-Business Undergraduate Prospective Student

Many types of candidates are drawn to graduate management education (GME), including those who have not previously studied business and rather earned undergraduate degrees in a science, technology, engineering, or mathematics (STEM) field, or in a liberal arts or humanities field. It may come as a surprise to some that these non-business undergraduate prospective students account for almost half of the current global graduate business school candidate pipeline.

As discussed in this research brief, like their business major counterparts, these prospective students seek development in various areas of business knowledge, as well as leadership and management skills, in order to accelerate their career development and access new opportunities. However, a close examination of survey data reveals interesting nuances in their journeys to business school and their goals. These nuances are essential for business school professionals to understand in order to more effectively position the value of an MBA or business master's degree to this sizeable candidate segment.

For example, prospective students who did not major in a business field are less drawn to developing a deep knowledge of corporate finance—a long-time staple of the graduate business experience—and instead show greater interest in a broad range of coursework in management disciplines. In a similar vein, while about half of candidates who were business majors are interested in pursuing jobs in the

finance/accounting industry after business school, non-business majors are drawn to the technology sector in larger numbers. They're also typically older than their business major counterparts, a reflection of the fact that non-business undergrads are more likely to first consider GME once they're already in the workforce.

Understanding the non-business undergraduate - and applying that knowledge to more effectively recruiting them - can assist business schools in elevating their classroom diversity. Candidates that studied liberal arts, STEM, or another non-business major as undergraduates bring not only a different academic background, but likely a different perspective and set of talents. Those with an undergraduate degree in STEM fields can bring a perspective that is quantitative or technical in nature and look at management challenges or subject areas from a more analytical lens. Similarly, liberal arts or humanities majors with honed soft skills like communication and creative thinking bring a different skillset to the business world and may help bring new solutions to old problems. By creating a non-homogeneous business school classroom, future business leaders can learn in a diverse setting that prepares them for their post-GME careers. For these reasons, actively seeking out prospective students from different undergraduate backgrounds is a net-positive for the whole business school class, and admissions and recruiting professionals with a data-driven understanding of this pipeline segment have a distinct advantage in reaching them.

Who is the non-business undergraduate prospective student?

Globally, 45 percent of 2021 respondents to the GMAC Prospective Students Survey studied a non-business subject as undergraduates. As defined by the survey, non-business undergraduate prospective students are candidates who did not earn a business or economics bachelor's degree and are currently considering pursuing a business education at the graduate level. These candidates include those who acquired a liberal arts degree, like social science or humanities, or a STEM degree as undergraduates.

Overall, non-business undergraduate prospective students tend to be older than their business major counterparts. Sixty-seven percent of prospective GME students 24 years or younger studied business as undergraduate students. Conversely, more than half of prospective students 31 and

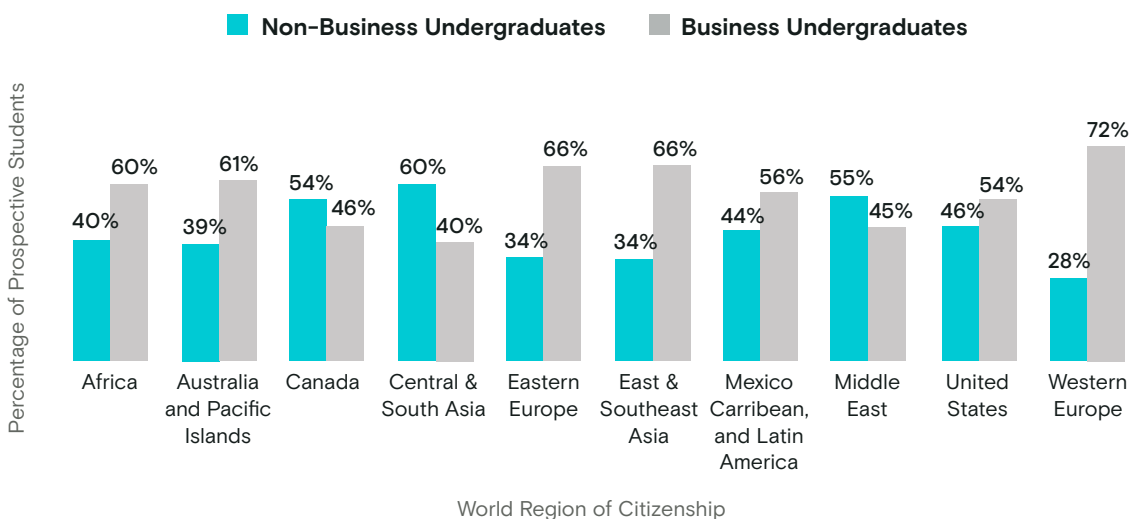
older are non-business undergraduates (56%) who decided to continue their academic paths with a GME degree.

As a whole, the graduate business school pipeline is majority male. Among surveyed prospective students in 2021, for example, 59 percent were men and 41 percent were women. Among non-business undergraduates, the gender balance shifts slightly more male than overall, with 62 percent being men.

Some world regions have a higher representation of non-business undergraduates who are pursuing GME than business undergrads (**Figure 1**), such as Central and South Asia (60% non-business vs. 40% business), Canada (54% vs. 46%), and the Middle East (55% vs. 45%).

Figure 1: Regional Representation of Non-Business vs. Business Undergrads

World region of citizenship by undergraduate major category, 2021



When do non-business undergraduates first consider graduate business school?

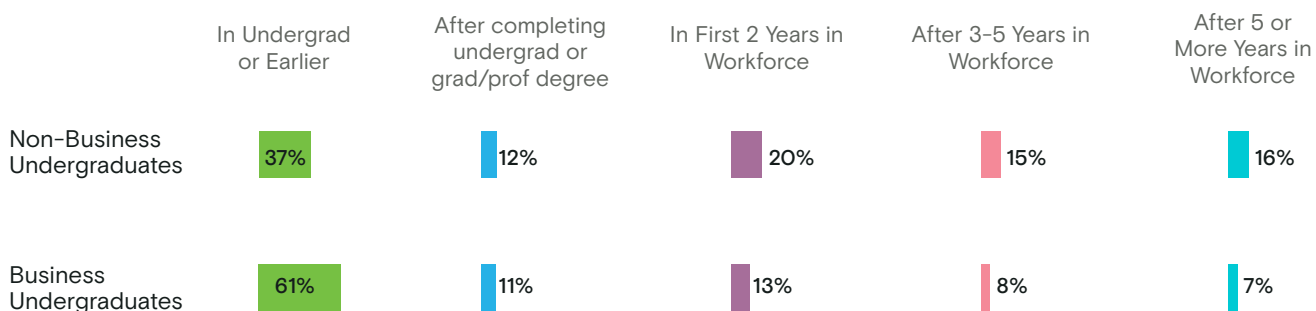
Over two-thirds (68%) of prospective business school candidates who did not study business as undergraduates say they are pursuing business school “to start out on a new path.” Thirty-six percent of these students said they were prompted to apply for graduate business school after wanting to apply for a job, but realizing they lacked the skills or degree that was necessary for them to be considered.

As suggested by the difference in age already discussed, non-business undergrads also tend to have a different timeline of when they begin their graduate education compared to those who studied business early on. Non-business undergrads tend to begin considering GME later; only 37 percent of non-business undergrads first consider a graduate business degree as

undergraduate students, compared with 61 percent of business undergraduates. Around 30 percent of non-business undergrads do not begin considering entering business school until being in the workforce for three or more years (**Figure 2**).

Another difference in their journey to GME is that non-business undergraduate prospective students are more likely to have already earned a master’s degree in a different field. Nearly a quarter (22%) of the non-business students surveyed had completed a master’s degree before pursuing graduate business school and 6 percent had completed a professional degree. In comparison, 82 percent of business undergrads have not completed an additional degree, only 14 percent of them have completed a master’s degree, and 4 percent completed a professional degree.

Figure 2: Timing of First Consideration of GME
Global candidates by undergraduate major, 2021



What are the career aspirations of non-business undergraduate prospective students?

Students interested in graduate business school later in their academic and professional careers also have different industry interests than business undergraduate students. Non-business undergrads are largely drawn to technology roles upon completing their graduate business program as well as positions in the products and services industry (**Figure 3**). Business undergrads skew towards jobs in financial services, consulting, and products and services industries. In comparison, those students who studied STEM or social science are more likely to aspire to jobs in the tech industry whereas the students who initially studied business/economics have less interest in the tech industry (47% non-business undergrads vs. 28% business undergrads), especially compared to fields in finance.

Non-business undergraduates most often say they're interested in the job functions of consulting (64%), general management (48%), and marketing/sales (36%; **Figure 4**). Conversely, business undergrads are more likely to express interest in finance/accounting roles (41% vs. 24%).

Figure 3: Post-GME Industries of Interest
Global candidates by undergraduate major, 2021

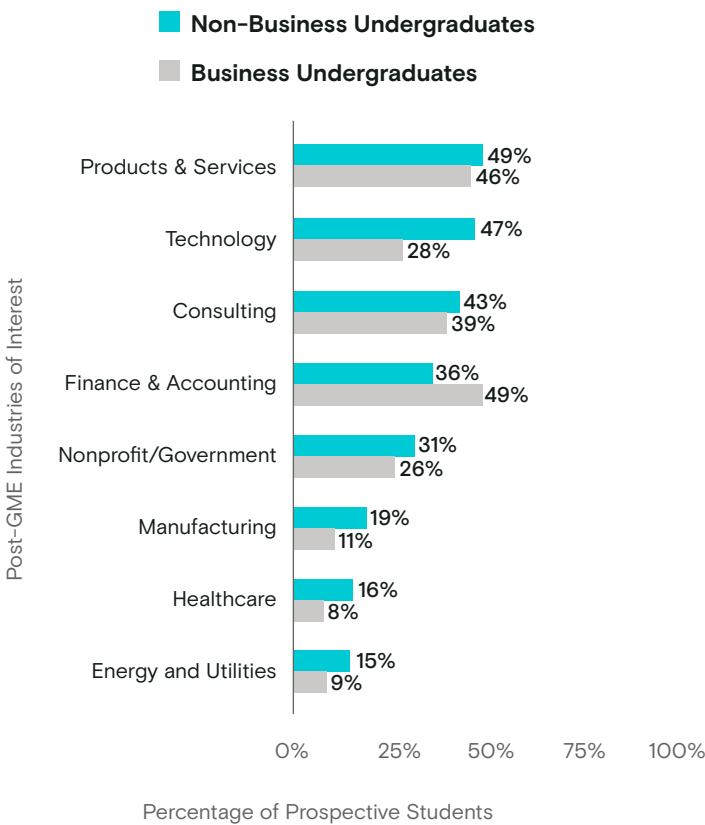
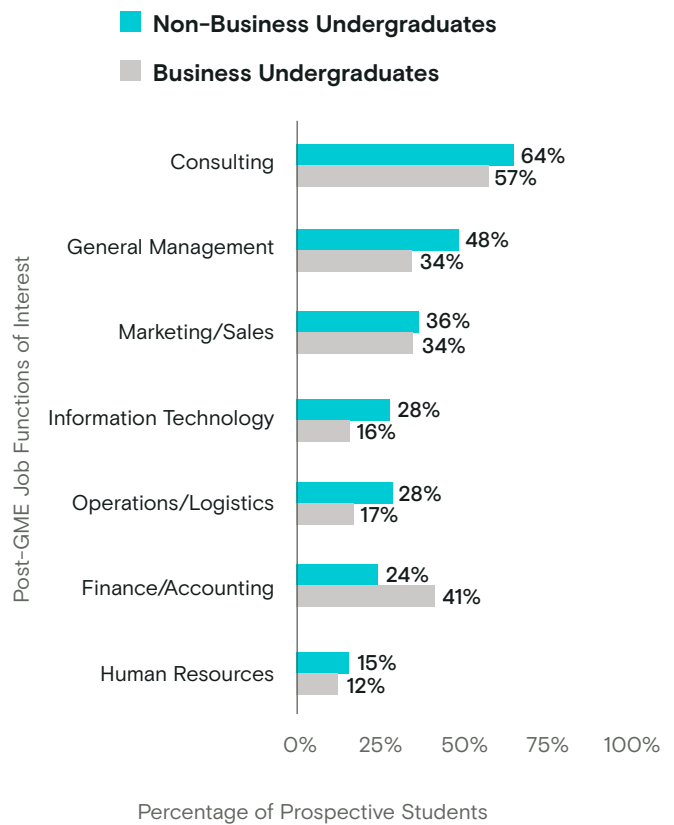


Figure 4: Post-GME Job Functions of Interest
Global candidates by undergraduate major, 2021



What do non-business undergraduate prospective students want to learn at business school?

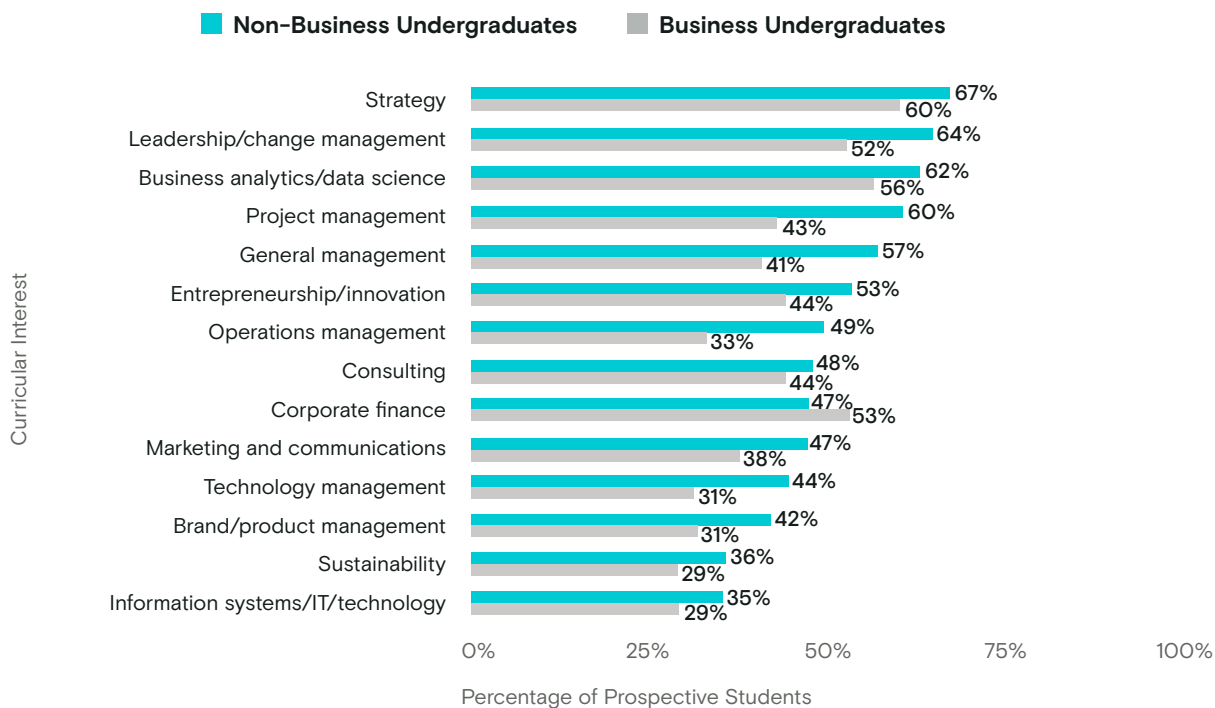
Non-business undergraduates choose to obtain a graduate business degree for a myriad of reasons, including to develop specific management skills and gain access to jobs in specific fields. In some ways, their desired learning outcomes differ from their business major counterparts. Specifically, non-business undergrads are more interested in gaining skills in managing human capital (72% non-business undergrads vs. 58% business undergrads) and data analysis and interpretation (71% vs. 68%).

Perhaps because of their undergraduate studies, or maybe due to specific interests, non-business undergraduates show interest in different coursework than students who previously studied business or economics. Compared to business undergrads, non-business students are more interested in courses in management, such as leadership/change management, general management, and project management. Students that studied STEM or social

science/humanities also have a larger interest in technical skills than those who studied business in undergrad; non-business candidates expressed interest in courses like business analytics/data science, technology management, and information systems/technology (**Figure 5**).

Non-business students also show other preferences in course offerings beyond technical and management courses. Those who did not study business as undergraduates prior to GME prefer classes in entrepreneurship/innovation (53% non-business vs. 44% business), marketing and communications (47% vs. 38%), brand/product management (42% vs. 31%), and sustainability (36% vs. 29%). Students who studied business in their undergraduate careers largely seek courses in corporate finance and prioritize these more than students who did not study business in their undergraduate (51% business vs. 47% non-business).

Figure 5: Curriculum Preferences
Global candidates by undergraduate major, 2021



How do non-business undergraduate prospective students choose which business schools to apply to?

Non-business undergrads and business undergrads converge on what program aspects they consider when applying to business schools. When asked to rank the program aspects they found most important, the most commonly important factors for non-business undergrads are the quality/reputation of the graduate business school, career aspects or opportunities, as well as specific program aspects and financial aspects such as financial costs or availability of scholarships.

Mainly, business undergrads highly valued these aspects as well, however, on average, business undergrads ranked curriculum aspects of a program slightly higher, whereas non-business undergrads are likelier to consider student class profile, such as the representation of women, minorities, age, and experience, than business undergrads.

Learn more

To read more about prospective students currently in the graduate business school pipeline, access the GMAC Prospective Students Survey - 2022 Summary Report at [gmac.com/prospectivestudents](https://www.gmac.com/prospectivestudents).

The **GMAC Prospective Students Survey – 2022 Summary Report** explores how prospective students' preferences have shifted during the COVID-19 pandemic and includes responses from more than 6,500 individuals worldwide who expressed interest in graduate business education in 2021.

About the Study

For more than a decade, the GMAC Prospective Students Survey has provided the world's graduate business schools with critical insights into the decision-making processes of people currently considering applying to a graduate management education (GME) program. Its questions—covering a diverse range of topics that impact prospective students' application and enrollment decisions—provide school professionals with timely, relevant, and reliable market intelligence to inform how they engage with candidates to build their incoming classes.

2021 Survey Sample Stats

6,594 2021 survey respondents

156 Countries of citizenship represented

41% Female respondents

45% Respondents who majored in a non-business field as undergraduates

36% Respondents who prefer to enroll in business master's programs

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