Annenberg Institute
BROWN UNIVERSITY

EdWorkingPaper No. 25-1252

A Degree of Choice: The Role of Occupations in Educational Decision-Making

Ellen Bryer
Brown University

Maya Kaul
University of Pennsylvania

Schooling is most closely connected to work at the highest levels of education. As a growing share of adults return to higher education after beginning work, we ask how individuals draw on their work experience and career values to select a graduate program. We draw on two independent but complementary interview studies to examine this question across higher- and lower-status occupations: business and teaching. We find that within both fields, students' career values and aspirations guide them toward distinct tiers of educational prestige. In higher-status graduate programs, students' perceived prospects are broadened or limited by occupational status. Our findings illuminate how both occupational and institutional status shape educational decision-making in the context of growing labor market uncertainty and economic precarity.

VERSION: August 2025

Suggested citation: Bryer, Ellen, and Maya Kaul. (2025). A Degree of Choice: The Role of Occupations in Educational Decision-Making. (EdWorkingPaper: 25-1252). Retrieved from Annenberg Institute at Brown University: https://doi.org/10.26300/xe6h-bx36

A Degree of Choice: The Role of Occupations in Educational Decision-Making

Ellen Bryer
Brown University
Annenberg Institute

Maya Kaul
University of Pennsylvania
Graduate School of Education

Abstract

Schooling is most closely connected to work at the highest levels of education. As a growing share of adults return to higher education after beginning work, we ask how individuals draw on their work experience and career values to select a graduate program. We draw on two independent but complementary interview studies to examine this question across higher- and lower-status occupations: business and teaching. We find that within both fields, students' career values and aspirations guide them toward distinct tiers of educational prestige. In higher-status graduate programs, students' perceived prospects are broadened or limited by occupational status. Our findings illuminate how both occupational and institutional status shape educational decision-making in the context of growing labor market uncertainty and economic precarity.

Introduction

Compared to other levels of education in the United States (US), graduate degrees are often closely linked with occupations (Bol et al., 2019; DiPrete et al., 2017). In other words, a large proportion of students who receive a graduate degree in a certain field are likely to enter into an occupation in that field. In the US, the proportion of students with an education-occupation "match" tends to be greatest in postsecondary education. Existing quantitative literature that examines the strength of ties between education and occupation linkages has focused on occupational matches for the level of the credential (e.g., baccalaureate versus postbaccalaureate) and field of study (e.g., humanities, health, sciences). Questions remain,

however, about other aspects of the intersection between education and occupation, such as the role of employers and career expectations in program selection. These questions are especially important in a changing economy where even white-collar employment is precarious (Cooper, 2014; Kalleberg, 2009; Neely, 2022; Pugh, 2015).

In this article, we address these gaps by asking: (1) How do workers draw on career values and expectations in order to navigate and choose among many master's programs in a given field?, and (2) To what extent does the relationship between career values and program choice vary across occupational fields with different levels of prestige? To address these questions, we draw on interview data collected from individuals across two occupational contexts–business and teaching–pursuing graduate credentials in programs with distinct status differences. Given the wide differences in occupational status of business and teaching, a cross-occupational study offers a valuable lens into how workers' educational choices are shaped and constrained by, not only their own individual values, but also the broader status hierarchies of their fields.

To that end, we bring together interview data from two projects with independent but complementary research designs. The first project focused on current MBA students. The second project focused on students enrolled in three teacher education programs (i.e., graduate programs for teaching). All respondents are both workers and students and both of the fields of study examined in this article are closely aligned with occupations. Bringing together data from two projects, therefore, facilitates comparisons across occupational prestige, enabling a wider set of findings.

Our findings document that across both business and teaching, students' work values and orientations guide them toward distinct tiers of educational prestige. Respondents in lower-status

graduate programs differ from those in higher-status programs in how they expect to benefit from a credential and their approach to selecting a specific program. Respondents in lower-status business and teaching programs seek a more immediate professional outcome (e.g., a promotion, a teaching license), and leverage less information to guide their decisions. However, we find a greater occupational contrast in higher-status graduate programs. On one hand, students in higher-status MBA programs envision their degree as a key that may open doors to an array of restricted, elite fields, such as politics and management consulting. As such, they are willing to pay for application consultants or move across the country for a specific program. On the other hand, students in the higher-status teaching programs perceive an upper-limit to their professional growth opportunities as teachers, and view graduate programs in more technical ways. While they value high-quality training and professional socialization, their choices remain constrained by practical considerations like cost and proximity. This difference suggests that occupational status and career values inform educational decision-making, in terms of the career prospects that prospective students imagine will follow from attending a particular program. More broadly, these differences between business and teaching underscore how the variation in occupations' mobility, prestige, and career ladders shape, and are reproduced through, students' educational pathways.

Together, this article illustrates how nonpecuniary priorities and occupational or professional alignment can structure students' decision of where to attend graduate school. Students interpret the value of ostensibly identical credentials in the same field of study very differently, depending on well-recognized markers of institutional prestige. Although this is a study of students, the findings also point to the role of employers, who view master's degrees as professional development, but can also have links to particular tiers of graduate programs, and

even particular schools. Importantly, our respondents are at once students and employees; they make educational decisions, while simultaneously navigating their broader professional values and expectations of the labor market. This article contributes to our understanding of how these institutions intersect.

Literature Review

Graduate education sits at an important nexus of education and occupational training. At the graduate level, compared to earlier levels of education, anticipated labor market returns may more directly shape educational decision-making (Bol et al., 2019; DiPrete et al., 2017; Grodsky et al., 2021; Kallio, 1995; Moss-Pech, Lopez, and Michaels, 2021). The strength of education-occupation linkages varies by country context and more specifically by the extent to which the educational system is oriented towards specific occupations (Bol et al., 2019). Providing opportunities for strong school-to-work pathways promotes secure, well-paying jobs; strength of linkages between school and work increase at higher levels of education (Araki, 2020; Bol et al., 2019; DiPrete et al., 2017; Witteveen and Attewell, 2023). Research on school to work linkages tends to follow that temporal ordering with schooling preceding work, measured in the fit of the first job after school or earnings returns.

Sociologists of education examine adults' returning to schooling (Grodsky et al., 2021; Moss-Pech et al., 2021) and conceptualize the educational system as a diversity of pathways rather than a linear pipeline (Kizilcec et al., 2023). In the new economy, postsecondary education also functions as an arena for working adults to pursue additional training or pursue relevant credentials for a career change (Cottom, 2017). Taken together, these bodies of literature raise questions about the role of work, specific employers, as well as broader occupational expectations in educational decision-making. In what follows, we synthesize the literature on the

different purposes of graduate education for both licensure and status distinction and review extant frameworks for students' educational decision-making at the graduate level.

The Role of Licensure

At the graduate level, occupations—certainly medical and legal professions, but also other fields such as education and social work—may require specific credentials to enter and advance (Collins, [1979] 2019; Cottom, 2017).[1] Within the sociology of professions, licensure has been understood as playing a key role in the professionalization of occupations (Abbott, 1991). In this view, occupational licenses offer a lever for *social closure* (Weber, 1992; Weeden, 2002), limiting entry into a particular occupation, and helping preserve and/or elevate the status of an occupation. Through credentialing and licensure, occupations can also claim jurisdiction over the professional knowledge base—a critical step toward consolidating professional authority (Abbott, 1988). However, the material and symbolic rewards of licensure may vary widely across occupations. Additionally, the rewards of licensure may vary by institution. Rivera (2015) shows that some elite professional employers, such as in consulting or corporate law, additionally look for credentials from specific institutions. Given the multitude of choices with a range of uncertain short- and long-term outcomes, questions remain about how students understand and navigate the range of program choices within a given field of study, especially in relation to their occupational goals.

The Role of Occupational Status and Prestige

Research in the sociology of education has focused on program and field choice at the elite end of the spectrum, and largely for undergraduate education. As educational offerings expand and access to postsecondary education increases, the stakes are higher for upper- and

[1] As education expands, the premium associated with the highest credentials continues to exist, but declines with skills diffusion (Araki, 2020).

upper-middle-class students to legitimize their status through education (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Status transmission across generations, or social reproduction, must occur through education. Students' decisions to pursue graduate education in fields like law or business may be couched as preferences, but reflect a deeper investment in the maintenance of class status through education (Schleef, 2006). Elite educational programs arm students with a particular cultural toolkit that prepares them to prefer and subsequently enter into elite professional careers (Binder et al., 2016; Schleef, 2006).

Small, but significant status distinctions contribute to stratification even among the most elite, serving to justify membership in elite occupations and command high incomes (Binder and Abel, 2019; Rivera, 2015). Status distinctions are particularly important in the elite business world, where graduates of certain institutions are seen as objectively "smart," "genius," ambitious, or a cultural fit with the firm (Ho, 2009; Rivera, 2015). If students view the choice of a program as a way to access valuable social capital, join influential social spheres, or bolster their own identity, information on programs' economic outcomes may be less relevant. As this body of research has focused on students nearing the end of their programs, questions remain about students' awareness or understanding of these distinctions during the process of selecting a program. Additionally, we lack an understanding of how students across graduate education—not just in the most elite institutions—approach program selection with respect to their occupational futures. It is possible that employer-institution links exist across the spectrum, though research is limited.

How Students Make Sense of Graduate Program Choice

Graduate education is horizontally stratified, meaning that there is a wide range of variation across how programs are structured and perceived institutional quality (Torche 2011,

Posselt and Grodsky). The resulting multitude of options, often subtly different from one another, means a proliferation of potential pathways through education for students (Gerber and Cheung, 2008; Lucas 2001). These pathways may vary widely in terms of cost and borrowing, occupational outcomes, institutional prestige, and other considerations.

In a human capital or rational choice framework, graduate school choice could be understood in terms of a prospective student weighing the potential costs against the potential benefits. However, assessing the returns to certain graduate programs is difficult in terms of both accessing the necessary information and accurately assessing one's own likely outcomes and opportunity cost without entering into the degree program (Altonji and Zhong, 2021; Lovenheim and Smith, 2022). In addition to the difficulty of assessing these factors, this perspective cannot account for nonpecuniary or qualitative aspects of this decision.

In the predominant model of program selection, individuals first develop aspirations for graduate education, then submit applications, and finally enroll in a particular program (English and Umbach, 2016). Within these phases, graduate program choice is patterned by both undergraduate institution and logistical concerns, such as residency and financial aid (Kallio, 1995; Krieg et al., 2016; Zhang, 2005). While some of these models include cultural and social capital at the individual level, they do not account for the possibility that the selection process is differently organized across different strata of selectivity. Additionally, existing scholarship does not account for the extent to which occupational expectations or employer preferences might inform students' graduate program choice.

In light of these lingering questions, this paper will investigate the intersection of education and occupations, investigating how individuals choose among many master's programs in a given field and the degree to which their process is linked with their career

expectations and values. Allowing for variation in values and process across program tiers, this paper seeks to understand both how students navigate a diverse and expanding field of options and the alignment between educational credentials and occupational expectations at the graduate level. By examining these dynamics across two occupational fields which vary widely in prestige, our findings bring to light new insights into the mechanisms and processes by which individuals–jointly students and workers–make sense of graduate program options, assess program fit, and engage in status-seeking behavior, perhaps even beyond elite educational spaces. The resulting findings will contribute to our understanding of how workers in different occupations navigate stratified arenas of education and how educational decision-making processes overlap with occupational decision-making.

Data and Methods

To address these questions, we combine data from two independent projects to understand how students navigate a diverse and expanding field of graduate options and how their educational choices align with occupational values and socialization. Prior research has brought together independently collected qualitative datasets on similar phenomena to build our understanding of broader social processes (see, for example, Darr and Mears, 2017; Tavory and Winchester, 2012; Vallas and Christin, 2018, Wohl and Besbris, 2024). While each study has unique aims, they both focus on the process of graduate program choice across institutions of varying prestige as it is related to occupational plans or professional identities. Bridging these studies of business and teaching, therefore, offers the opportunity to study the more generalized process of work and school linkage, beyond one particular degree and across tiers of occupational prestige. In what follows, we describe the occupational contexts of business and teaching to situate our study.

Occupational contexts: Business and K-12 Teaching

Business and education are the two most common master's degrees in the US; together, they account for 40 percent of master's degrees conferred in 2021-22 (IES, 2024). The cases of business and K-12 teaching present two occupational fields which vary widely in their occupational prestige, specificity, and licensure requirements (Strober & Tyack, 1980). In both fields, the purposes and structure of graduate education vary just as widely. In what follows, we briefly provide context on each field to help situate our work.

Business

The broad fields of business and marketing encompass a range of specific occupations, such as managers, analysts, and consultants (BLS, 2025). Unlike the fields of law and medicine, business occupations do not strictly require educational credentials for licensing (Abbott, 1991; Losee, 2021; Weeden, 2002), although educational credentials, especially from particular institutions, are a gateway to enter elite firms (Ho, 2009; Rivera, 2015).

Business schools and the MBA programs within them have well-known prestige hierarchies (Rivera, 2015). In a correspondence study, Bennett (2022) found no difference in the rate of positive employer response between job applicants with MBAs from the most common program types (i.e., for-profit, regional, and online) and applicants who only had a bachelor's degree. MBAs are increasingly common; they have grown from 11 percent of all master's degrees in 1970 to 23 percent of all master's degrees in 2020 (NCES 2021). With this shift, prestige hierarchies may have become more salient in shaping students' process of deciding where to apply and attend as well as employers' perception of the credential they receive (Bennett, 2022; Bills, Di Stasio, and Gërxhani, 2017; Rivera, 2015). MBA earnings can vary widely across institutions and students' counterfactual employment conditions (Altonji and

Zhong, 2021). These different interpretations of potential returns may inform university marketing tactics or students' motivations for entry.

K-12 Teaching

Historically, K-12 teaching has been a de-professionalized, lower-status occupation in the US (Goldstein, 2015; Mehta, 2013b; Strober and Tyack, 1980). Despite decades of reforms aimed at elevating the occupational status and prestige of K-12 teaching, the status of teaching is currently at, or below, its lowest levels in at least 50 years (Kraft & Lyon, 2024). Unlike more professionalized occupational fields (Abbott, 1988), teaching does not have consistent pathways, requirements to entry, a set knowledge base, or standards for practice set by practitioners (Goldstein, 2015; Lortie, 1975; Mehta, 2013a). And unlike in business, procuring a license to teach is a precondition to entering the profession. However, teacher licensure has not served as a strong mechanism for professional control, given that many states provide "emergency" pathways for teachers to earn their licensure without completing a rigorous training. Particularly as states deal with concerns of teacher shortages, many states have also foregone licensing requirements in order to quickly fill teacher vacancies (Chi et al., 2023).

Within this context, graduate programs to become a teacher (also referred to as "teacher education programs") have historically been devalued in the landscape of US higher education (Labaree, 2004). The low prestige of teaching as a profession has left the role, and value, of graduate degrees for teachers a highly-contested topic in the field (e.g., Ladd et al., 2015). On the one hand, some argue that graduate degrees serve as a bureaucratic gatekeeping mechanism, preventing the field from quickly addressing teacher shortages; others argue that the graduate degree training is required to ensure both a high professional standard for the field (Comstock et al., 2025). Only a few states require K-12 teachers to earn a master's degree to earn their

teaching license. In most states, one can earn one's teaching license through a wide range of pathways, including programs based in non-profits, K-12 school districts, and a growing landscape of for-profit providers. As such, the graduate landscape of teacher education is highly-fragmented and crowded (Cochran-Smith, 2023; Wilson & Kelley, 2022), and there has been a move away from universities as the central provider of graduate degrees in teaching towards more independent and for-profit providers.

Data collection

The first study is an interview-based study of students (n = 25) attending business schools in the Northeast US, roughly between Baltimore and Boston. The first author gathered this sample through snowball sampling through personal and academic networks as well as enlisting student representatives at qualifying MBA institutions to share the posting in student channels. After each interview, the first author asked participants to recommend others who may be interested in participating. The semi-structured interview protocol covered respondents' family backgrounds, experience applying to and attending college, experience applying to and selecting a graduate school, experiences paying for higher education, intervening work experience, and future career and family goals.

Informed by prior research on intersections between higher education and elite professional occupations (Losee, 2021; Perna, 2004; Rivera, 2015), the first author sought a diverse sample across gender and institutional prestige. Thus, the sample includes roughly even numbers of men and women. The majority of MBA respondents are White, especially among full-time elite students. The full sample is about one-fifth black and one-quarter Asian-American. The mean age is about 29 years old and all students, except for one who entered an MBA

program directly after college, either were currently employed or had been employed after graduating from their undergraduate education.

The participants represent ten different programs. In the analysis, we consider five programs as both full-time and elite. When we refer to "elite" or "higher-status" business programs, it refers to programs in the group of business schools that are consistently viewed at the top of a common categorical schema,[2] which tend to only offer full-time or executive education.[3] Less elite programs, referred to as "lower-status" in this analysis, may be well regarded locally, but do not rank highly or appear at all in national rankings. They are most likely to be part-time or credit-based. The sticker price of an MBA ranges from about $225,000 for a two-year degree from an elite business school to about $60,000 for a part-time degree from a less selective private institution.

The second study is an interview-based study of students (*n*=38) attending three focal teacher education programs across the US. The second author recruited a stratified sample of teacher candidates which was demographically representative of teachers in each program (e.g., based on racial/ethnic demographics), as aligned with the goals of the broader study. The semi-structured interview protocol covered respondents' personal and professional backgrounds, their decision-making process in applying to and selecting a graduate program, their professional visions for their work, and their professional identity formation within their graduate programs.

As part of the broader project the second study was a part of, the second author aimed to recruit a sample of students across teacher education programs which reflected notable variation

[2] There are several prominent ordinal ranking lists for MBA programs, all of which rely on different criteria and change each year. During the interview stage, it became clear that a static categorical ranking system was more salient, especially among the elite respondents. In the categorical schema, there are seven business schools that are consistently viewed at the top, regardless of fluctuations in specific ranking systems.

[3] In order to maximize similarity among the sample, students in executive programs were not included.

within the field of teacher education (Kaul, 2024). To that end, the second author intentionally sampled students across three programs that reflect key axes of variation in the field: (1) a private, university-based program, (2) a public, university-based program, and (3) a large, for-profit, online program. In this analysis, we consider the first two university-based programs as "elite" or "higher-status" teaching programs, as they are among those identified in public rankings as top-programs. We consider the for-profit program "lower-status," because it is not highly-ranked, and because students across the program report public perceptions of the program as lower-status in the field. This program is also notably structured quite differently. Whereas the first two programs confer master's degrees alongside teacher certification and are year-long, full-time programs, the for-profit program only offers a pathway to teacher certification and is fully self-paced and asynchronous. The cost of programs also varies based on their status. The "elite" or "higher-status" programs cost between $30,000 to $50,000, and the for-profit program charges only $300 upon enrollment and then charges $5,000 only if students become employed as a teacher.

Interviews in both studies lasted an average of one hour and were recorded and transcribed. Throughout this paper, both authors use pseudonyms for respondents and employers and do not name the actual program or institution that respondents attend. However, institutions are named when they are referenced descriptively by respondents.

Together, the data synthesized from across these two studies offers a unique platform to study variation within and across *occupational* and *institutional* status. Within both a higher-status cluster of occupations (i.e., business) and a lower-status occupation (i.e., teaching), we capture variation in graduate program status (Figure 1). This offers insight into how individuals

make sense of the value of graduate credentials in relation to the broader status of their occupation, as well as in relation to the perceived prestige of specific institutions.

Figure 1. Graduate program attributes across occupational and institutional status

Occupational Status	Institutional Status (Educational): Lower	Institutional Status (Educational): Higher
Lower	Teacher Education *Self-paced, for-profit, online-only*	Teacher Education *Full-time, top-ranked, university-based*
Higher	MBA *Part-time, local, unranked*	MBA *Full-time, elite, top-ranked*

Data analysis

To analyze the MBA data, the first author employed abductive analysis, which cultivates "anomalous and surprising empirical findings against a background of multiple existing sociological theories" (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012, p. 169). To do this, the first author transcribed and wrote an analytic memo after each interview. She first conducted an initial round of structured open coding, drawing on inductive codes derived from the existing theory, and took note of emergent codes, especially as they challenge or complicate existing theory. She then conducted an additional round of focused coding, this time with codes that had to do with the emerging argument (Deterding and Waters, 2018; Timmermans and Tavory, 2012). She used ATLAS.ti to manage the documents and associated codes.

To analyze the teacher education data, the second author conducted three primary stages of analysis (Miles et al., 2014). First, throughout the data collection process, she wrote analytic memos documenting the emergent themes in the data, and took note of potential codes. Second, she developed an *a priori* coding framework grounded in the theoretical frameworks which

guided the broader study. Aligned with this analysis, the *a priori* codes included codes grounded in previous empirical and theoretical work on teacher professional identity formation (e.g., Ronfeldt, 2008). Second, she conducted an initial round of coding on a subset of the data, and documented additional inductive codes. Finally, she leveraged both the *a priori* and inductive codes to code the full dataset. She used *Dedoose* to code each transcribed interview.

Finally, the authors worked together to analyze their data alongside each other. To that end, they first conducted a crosswalk of their initial coding frameworks to identify points of continuity and difference between their analytic process. Drawing on this crosswalk, they mapped key themes across the datasets, focused on students' professional values, their rationales for their program choice, and their descriptions of occupational status and institutional prestige. To capture the shared themes across both studies, both authors discussed and wrote memos on emerging themes. Together, this joint analysis allowed them to trace patterns within and across each occupation and institutional setting.

Findings

Students' orientations to work and their expectations for their career trajectories shape the tier of programs applied to and their application process. We discuss respondents' orientations to employment and the resulting application and program selection process, comparing the experiences of business and teaching respondents in higher- and then lower- status graduate programs. We find that this relationship between students' values and graduate program choice are similar between lower-status business and teaching programs. On the other hand, we observe occupational differences are more salient within high-status programs.

Career values and expectations in lower-status programs

Those who attend programs in less-selective regional institutions pursue clear goals of upward vertical mobility and seek to ensure their competitiveness for future job applications

within the field. Students' desire to insure their next steps or credentialize their skills may be a way to manage uncertainty about their own future employability. This focus on attaining a credential facilitates a straightforward application process to a narrow field of potential programs, prioritizing factors like low enrollment costs over prestige. Individuals select a program, mostly in less prestigious local or online institutions where they can earn a credential that will be useful for their career next steps. MBA students pursued professional development, promotions, and eventual access to management positions while teacher education students pursued licensure and hiring. In pursuing a graduate degree as technical capital, respondents embrace traditional notions of vertical career progression. Students' priorities in program selection reflect their plans to stay with the same employer or within the same career field after graduation. Part-time students' experiences also suggest that employers are invested in these kinds of MBA programs and often structure students' application process through tuition reimbursement benefits.

The next career step

Respondents in less prestigious programs (i.e., part-time MBA students in local institutions and the for-profit teacher education program) are motivated to pursue an MBA or earn a teaching credential by career goals that reflect traditional vertical career progression. Nathan, who is enrolled in an MBA program at a locally recognized institution described his hope that an MBA would help him secure a promotion. After switching jobs and self-directing his own professional development there, Nathan felt stuck:

> I felt like I was still primarily sitting in the same area that I was in [my last job]… Like doing kind of the same things. Now obviously I know you always have to start at the

> bottom to work your way up, but I felt that earning an MBA would kind of accelerate my career and hopefully push me into an associate role perhaps quicker.

Nathan hopes that the MBA means that his next position will be at least a notch above his previous position in the insurance industry. Bela works in the tech industry and runs a small business on the side. Her goals are less immediate, but still she hopes that her MBA will help her to advance vertically when the time comes:

> What I'm hoping for, is in the future, when it comes to let's say, like a director level role or a VP level role, people will see that I have an MBA, and that'll be an asset towards some of those jobs.

While Bela and Nathan perceive the MBA as an asset or as a way to eventually get ahead, the MBA is not a prerequisite for advancement in the same way that a licensure credential is.

On the other hand, students who enrolled in the lower-status teacher education program were aware that earning a teaching credential, with the support of the program, would be a prerequisite to their career advancement. The low cost and self-paced, online nature of the lower-status teacher education program particularly appealed to students who decided to become a teacher after pursuing another career in a different industry. The lower-status program offered an affordable route into teaching that would not require them to forgo wages while they completed their training. One student, Bill, made the decision to become a teacher after a career working in a corporate setting, and noted that his perceived economic returns from the program were a major driver in his decision to enroll in the for-profit program over a traditional, university-based (and higher-status) program:

> I chose [my program] for one real reason and that was I put a lot of, because of my business background, I put a lot of emphasis on the idea of putting your money where

> your mouth is: the business standing behind their product. [This program] had in their policies and procedures that unless you got a job, they did not charge you. They did not charge you until you got the job, so I was like, "Even though I didn't have any doubts because the school had already told me they wanted me, I didn't have any doubts that I was going to get a job." I like a company that is willing to stand behind their product, their service. [...] That just comes from my 25 years in management.

In addition to the low cost of enrolling in the lower-status program, the flexible, asynchronous format allowed those making a career switch to teaching to stay employed in their previous jobs while completing their degrees. As Tina reflects:

> My life is complicated, so I needed a program that could deal with my lifestyle. [...] I've been a non-traditional student probably most of my life. So online classes are more my thing. Even getting my graduate degree was non-traditional because I was in the military when I got that. Having something that was flexible was probably one of the selling places for me to come to this program.

In this way, students who chose to enroll in the lower-status teacher education program were less motivated by the quality or status of the program, and were instead driven by the ease and practicality of enrolling in the for-profit program.

For students attending part-time programs at local institutions, enrolling in a graduate program can also be a strategy to be more competitive in future job applications. Steve described himself as a forever “silver medalist,” given his challenges with being a competitive job applicant. Dee works in the real estate industry and noticed she also had difficulty applying to the particular type of job she was interested in. She explains:

> I wanted to get into an acquisition investment type of role within real estate because like, that's not something that I learned about in undergrad and I thought was really interesting. So I basically applied to a bunch of jobs and I would go on interviews and I always got passed over for someone else who had more experience, with more real estate finance experience. And I was like, 'What do I do?' So I was just really trying to figure it out, and I thought about going back to school.

Even though Dee and Steve felt their competitors had more experience, they both seek to address this gap with a business degree. For students in teaching, enrolling in the for-profit program primarily served as a pathway to becoming credentialed as full-time teachers in their school districts. In this way, students in this program saw their programs in very functional ways. As one teacher described, she saw the purpose of the for-profit teacher education program primarily as "just a pathway into teaching."

Straightforward application

For the most part, students who go on to attend lower-status programs consider a limited number of exclusively lower-status programs and are instrumental in the criteria they use to choose a program. Their application phase is relatively short and, when evaluating programs, students consider logistics like distance from home in making their decision. In teaching, several students reported that their for-profit program was the only program they were even aware of. These individuals were either working or volunteering in schools in non-teaching roles, and were introduced to the for-profit program as a pathway to become a teacher, or they switched into teaching from another career after learning about the program. In this way, students enrolled in the less prestigious programs often had less information guiding their decision-making process. For example, Elizabeth shares: "I didn't really find any [other program] as easily as this one so I

didn't look at anything else." In another case, Hanna shares that her children' s teacher had completed the same and introduced her to it:

> Actually my kids' teacher [...] told me that she went through this program. And so that's kind of how I ended up with that one. Cause I'm sure there's other [programs], but that one just seemed, you know, pretty solid for like a crash course in education.

Similarly, regarding her decision to enroll in her MBA program, Bela explains,

> I wanted to specifically be in the Philadelphia area. So the scope of schools was limited. And then I decided to just apply to part time programs and I knew some people that went to [the school I chose]. So that's kind of what made the decision for me.

Sam describes his process of getting connected with the first and only MBA program he applied to: "I reached out to one of those, I think it was like an advisor or admissions and sign[ed] up on their website. They reached out almost next day…just kind of talking through it…. And they were pretty straightforward of how I should apply, you know, essays, all that stuff." Test waivers, either due to pandemic policies or other applicant characteristics, were common among part-time students. The only other program Sam considered would have been an online program that cost two or three times the amount per credit so he felt that his choice was easy. Once he identified a school, he followed their standard application steps to gain admission.

Employer alignment

Employers are also invested in guiding respondents through these kinds of degree programs through tuition reimbursement programs. As graduate students, employees pursue professional development outside of work hours and receive a benefit in the form of a credential they can take with them to future jobs. In cases where an employer will pay for some or all of a students' degree, employers' tuition reimbursement policies can dictate the scope of the search,

often narrowing it. For example, some school districts facing teacher shortages partner with the lower-status teacher education program to cover the tuition costs, in order to quickly help fill vacant teaching positions. Lucie recounted that she first learned of her program after receiving promotional materials about the tuition assistance deal: “I started receiving emails from them saying, you know, we're offering this program for free. You know, just submit your application and, you know, we'll see if you qualify.” Similarly, Sally accepted an accounting job at a local liberal arts school with a modest starting salary of $52,000, but free enrollment in their degree programs. She seized this opportunity to pursue an MBA at the institution: “The reason I applied was because it’s a benefit. And I mean, I know I’m going to learn a lot, and it’s just going to be something that I’m gonna be able to have on my resume and be one step above other people that just graduate undergrad with a business degree.”

Because the tuition benefits allow students to earn graduate degrees for free at their institutions, the program selection process for both Lucie and Sally was entirely structured by their employers. However, as evidenced by Sally’s salary compared to that of other MBA respondents, this benefit may be offered in exchange for lower pay. Similarly, many school districts offer teachers a higher salary if they have a graduate degree (i.e., Master’s of Education) on top of a teaching credential, so Lucie may have also lost out on potential earnings, and potential for career growth, by not considering other programs

MBA respondents who accept employers’ tuition reimbursement fit into established organizational patterns in terms of program selection. For example, Kayla and Tamara work for a traditional utility company, which we call EnergyCo, managing teams of technicians and have both gone through the management training program. Kayla and Tamara both chose the same part-time MBA program housed in a top-ranked institution where many of their coworkers have

recently attended. When it came time to decide which of the local program to attend, Kayla's assessment of the reputations of the different programs was shaped by her coworkers' experiences and perceptions:

> It was watching a lot of people that I knew that went there, and their career path in EnergyCo, and even leaving EnergyCo. So, EnergyCo has a huge pipeline for a couple of schools, depending on what degree you're doing… So I spoke to people who went to different colleges, what they were studying, what they were looking for. Quite a few of my mentors went to [the program I chose], probably that made me a little biased there.

Tamara agrees that the part-time MBA program was the established pattern among their coworkers and mentors, and almost an unwritten part of the company's guarantee to fund a degree. She recalls: "I had at that time, maybe six other friends who were doing or started the program the year before, three that were starting at the same time as me and a few friends who were having conversations about them getting started with it. That's how normal it is with EnergyCo."

In addition to highlighting the role of employer networks in making program choice decisions, Kayla and Tamara suggest that the prevalence of this specific MBA credential means that it will continue to be legible as a valuable credential in the context of this employer where they both anticipate staying indefinitely. Further, both view their MBAs as professional development for their upward management trajectories. Tamara explains:

> Actually I was literally having a personnel issue. And I was able to talk through it in class …We talked about how I could solve this problem... And I did, and it's working great now! So like, part-time, working with other professionals, I've taken so much from it already…. A bunch of topics and lessons I could use just moving forward in my career.

Whereas MBA students fit with their workplaces by enrolling in part-time MBA programs, students in the for-profit teacher education program reported that their workplaces had more mixed views on the legitimacy, and ultimately value, of their program. On one end of the spectrum, Malcolm was actively counseled into enrolling into the for-profit teacher education program by his employers:

> In January I took a position at a charter school, a Detroit charter school, and I was there three years learning the ins and outs of teaching. And it was from there that [my school administrators] told me, you know, if I was real serious about education, how about coming back and actually being a teacher and they were gonna put me through [the for-profit teacher education program] and I just needed to pass the Michigan Teacher Certification test.

On the other end of the spectrum, Ira recalls his principal's skepticism when he first decided to enroll in the for-profit program:

> [My principal] was hired at the end of last year and he's been kind of aloof about the [for-profit teacher education] thing. He kind of looked at me like, "Well I guess we needed somebody to fill the English department. And I guess you're coming in through a back door and I guess, yeah, you've got an interim certificate, whatever that means."

Despite his principal's initial skepticism, Ira shared that his principal eventually came around to see the value of the program. However, the principal's concerns were not unfounded. The lower-status has been subject to intense regulatory scrutiny in recent years for failing to meet state policy standards for teacher education programs in one of the states it operates in. Additionally, there is emerging evidence that for-profit teacher education programs produce teachers who are both less effective and less likely to stay in the profession long-term (Edwards & Madill, 2024;

Kirksey & Gottlieb, 2024). Still, such programs continue to expand nationally, in large part due to the fact that many school districts face intense teacher shortages and seek quick solutions to fill empty positions.

Career values and expectations in higher-status programs

Respondents who choose higher-status institutions pursue a graduate program that aligns with their broader career values and will provide professional socialization. Though respondents across business and teaching emphasized institutional prestige, occupational status, and values alignment in their choice of program, we observed much starker differences between business and teaching graduate students in higher-status programs than we did in the lower-status programs. MBA students enroll in higher-status programs seeking to reclaim agency over their career trajectory or pivot horizontally to new fields that they perceive to have even greater influence and higher earning potential, seeking membership in an exclusive group. In the relatively lower status occupation of teaching, however, students in teaching have less room to progress in their careers. Enrollment in higher-status programs in teaching is more frequently driven by their perceived values-alignment with their program, or their perception of the quality of their program. Across both occupations, respondents in higher-status programs invest substantial time and resources into the application process and consider an array of programs.

MBA Programs

In business, graduate students see elite MBA programs as spaces to pursue additional distinction and membership in an exclusive group. In other words, respondents enroll in higher-status MBA programs as a way to pursue symbolic capital. Accordingly, application processes among this group of respondents were more intensive. MBA students enrolled in higher-status

programs reject traditional vertical career progression and resist being confined to one company or one narrow field, even if it is highly stable or high-paying.

Career pivot. Students who pursue business degrees from top universities view these degrees as potentially transformative or door-opening. After working a high-paying ($175,000) but demanding job in communications for six years, Franny felt she was at a crossroads. A few years before starting MBA applications, she considered "advancement opportunities within the company" and started to ask, "if I wanted something else, what would that look like? And how would I do it?" Given that her parents both have MBAs from an elite business school, she viewed the degree as inherently worthwhile. Her internship with a politician, an alumnus of her school, confirmed the value of both the network and others' inflated view of what a selective MBA means:

> The level of access I have to certain spheres of politics, or just business, like, it is no joke. … I think when you have an MBA, and I've experienced that a little bit in my internship this summer, people assume different things about you and your skill set, even if they have never met you. Like, I have taken one accounting class…I've never taken econ before this year. But I'm doing economic development. People make assumptions about your expertise or your ability to learn something…I think my ability to do jobs outside of communications has like gone up exponentially, just…my network will make it much easier for me to get into the door for jobs that like I historically, or maybe even now, am not fully technically qualified to do.

Franny is sure that her decision will ultimately grant her access to move horizontally into influential spheres where people will have confidence in her abilities, even if it is not technically justified. In comparison to the part-time students in non-elite programs who pursue MBAs to

demonstrate technical skills and secure vertical career progressions, Franny pursues an elite MBA as a form of symbolic capital.

Full-time MBA students in selective programs reject the idea of being "stuck" in a given field, but not solely for access to higher incomes. After college, Bailey worked in sales in an educational technology company and was earning $180,000 per year but describes feeling stuck:

> I worked in that role for four years, and I was pretty successful. Was making six figures a year, like, kind of stumbled into this really good gig. And, but I just realized, I was like, gosh, I'm 26 like, I don't want to be in sales forever…I need to really think about what I can do long term. I always say like, I don't want my job to be like the thing that is driving me.… And so anyway, I was looking at other jobs and I was finding that really the only jobs…that I was qualified for were other sales jobs. And I…kind of felt backed into a corner. And all of a sudden I just had this moment of like, yeah, maybe the solution is going back to grad school.

In contrast to part-time students who see their MBA as professional development or insurance for vertical promotions in their current occupation, Franny and Bailey illustrate how full-time MBAs from selective programs are perceived as a way to change careers to pursue something more influential. They each described feeling "at a crossroads" or "backed into a corner" regarding their perception of diminishing opportunities to pivot to another field. While they both have a new field in mind, Franny and Bailey most emphatically describe a fear of being stuck in the same career, even if it has opportunities for vertical promotions and salary increases.

"Company man" considerations. Among elite full-time MBA students, employers can still structure the program selection process. Prominent and wealthy firms offer generous tuition repayment benefits that guide employees into the top business schools and back into the firms.

The path from the organization into the most elite business schools is highly structured. However, respondents carefully weighed what this reinforced connection with their employer would mean for their careers.

In addition to reclaiming agency over one's career trajectory, students felt that leaving their company to pursue a selective MBA would guard against being perceived as a "company man" who is overly enmeshed with his employer. Ted had worked for a prominent investment company, Mutual, for five years, as his first job after military service. He explains: "I felt that I was at the point in my career where I was probably going to be siloed to Mutual, not really able to make a switch elsewhere and probably siloed to [their] structured career trajectory without making a significant investment in myself. And so that's what brought me to pursue an MBA." Ted understood this point in his career at a crossroads of whether to become a "Mutual person" or take more control over his career progression. This was also part of his reasoning for not accepting his employer's assistance:

> I didn't want to commit to going back because I've only ever been at Mutual. So I've been there for five years. And if I went back for four, then I'd be there for nine years. And then at that point, I would be pretty pigeonholed to my options. I will be labeled as you know, as a Mutual person. And...that's not a pigeonhole that I wanted to commit myself to at this point in my career. So I wanted to keep my options open.

Respondents who bristle at employer reimbursement arrangements may feel they are submitting to corporate control of their career trajectory. This rejection challenges what we may assume about workers' preferences for stable employment relationships amid economic precarity.

Respondents who accept their employers' offers of support with applying to and paying for a top MBA degree understand that they are limiting or postponing their ability to pivot into

other fields. Hugo works for a prominent consulting firm, Consult, who will fully fund his degree, compensate him for any internships he does at the company or its associates, and offer $1,000 toward application expenses (e.g. GMAT preparation, application fees, hiring an admissions consultant). Owing at least in part to these corporate resources and pathways, Hugo is hopeful he will receive admission to one of the top three business schools and a full scholarship from two other elite business schools. He explains:

> When you're at Consult there's a lot of support and resources, both kind of documents that they've prepared and also just like most everyone you work with has gone and applied to business school. And so I kind of still had those documents from my time working there... I also used an MBA admissions consultant. They they're pretty common for the industry and like a lot of them have partnerships with some of these bigger firms as well. And so I was pretty intentional about seeing if I could get into a Harvard or a Stanford, I felt pretty good about getting into Wharton based on my work history and my test scores, etc. And then whether or not I could get a full ride or like something close to UVA Darden and Yale School of Management.

Hugo's application process is similar to that of other respondents who secure admission to the most elite schools. But, the resources provided through Consult facilitate his confidence in the process of applying and pursuing scholarships from the most prestigious programs.

In line with elite MBA student's preference to pivot and avoid becoming stuck in a company, Hugo describes his tie to the firm and guarantee of a post-MBA job that pays over $200,000 annually as a compromise and a delay in the pursuit of a career he sees as more meaningful:

> Yeah, I think my career trajectory is going to be weird, because I know, I will go back to Consult but I know, that's not what I want to do long term. I am probably going to do something that I feel like it's too risky for me to do as a full time job that I'm interested in. And so like, one of the things I've been noodling on is like Asian American community organizing or advocacy. So I like I can see myself…in like state and local government, like working for a state senator or something like that.

Hugo indicates that he does not necessarily value a traditional career trajectory of upward mobility within an established firm. He accepts the need to return to Consult but with the promise of a more passion-driven turn in his career sometime in the future, which also happens to be in a highly influential role. He expects a seamless transition to these other domains.

Extensive application process. Elite, full-time MBA students consider many of the top-ranked full-time programs and launch an extensive search, often hiring admissions consultants for several thousands of dollars. Benny's two-year admissions process leading up to the start of his program in fall 2022 is typical among full-time elite MBA students:

> I left my first job…in 2020, during the pandemic. A big reason for it was because I was working very long hours, and I needed time to study for the GMAT, and then prepare for my applications…I looked at the top ranking MBA programs, I started with, you know, the average like GPAs, GMAT scores, work experiences, to see, 'Okay, how does my profile compare to those?' … I knew I probably would need to do really well on the GMAT…So then I wound up enrolling for a class online. Did that, took the test, did okay… Shopped around for [an admissions consultant] too, found somebody who I felt like I could trust and then worked with her to just develop a strategy, figure out like, where to apply and whatnot.

This long, iterative process included research, test preparation, and working with an admissions consultant who cost Benny $6,000. This contrasts sharply to the process Nathan describes above of reaching out directly to an admissions advisor at a local school and following standard instructions to apply.

Teacher Education Programs

In teaching, on the other hand, students pursue graduate degrees because they are required to obtain teaching licenses in order to enter the teaching profession, and master's degree programs are one pathway to obtaining those degrees. Whereas students who enrolled in the lower-status teacher education program chose their program because of its low cost and ease (and did not receive master's degrees upon completion of their programs), students who enrolled in higher-status degree programs did more research to inform their program choice. These students committed to full-time programs, which are both more expensive to enroll in and require that they forgo other wages for the year they were in their program. Accordingly, students in the higher-status programs also prioritized different factors in their program choice, such as perceived program quality and values-alignment. These students see their graduate degree program as more than just a technical pathway to get a license, but also as a site of professional socialization–i.e., a pathway to becoming a particular sort of professional. In this way, these students seek to garner both technical and symbolic capital from their graduate programs, whereas students in the lower-status teacher education program primarily pursue technical capital.

Quality markers. Students who enrolled in higher-status teacher education programs were largely guided by markers of "program quality." These students vary in how they assess quality. Some gauge "quality" based on the public prestige of programs. For example, in

reflecting on how she selected her teacher education program, Lisa reflects: “a lot of my professors were familiar with [the program] and they told me really good things about it.” In other cases, students enrolled in the higher-status teacher education programs reflect that, in the absence of more meaningful quality markers, they defer to public program rankings. As Bob reflects:

> I looked at and subscribed to the *US News* thing, which I'm not sure if that really matters, but, now looking back on it in hindsight, I wanted to make sure I was going to a school that had some quality–some *quality rating* there. And I didn't really know another way of going about that other than looking at that kind of–I think a little superficial–ranking system.

In this way, program rankings both guide students’ search for programs, as well as their ultimate selection of a high-quality program. Other students rationalize their program choice based on the perceived academic quality of their program. As Aurelia shares:

> I wanna be somewhere where I feel really challenged and supported. Clearly I'm a nerd, but like about education. [...] I was like, yeah, I also wanted to think about the academics too and like the support I'd be getting.

Though they had slightly different sources of information for how to assess program quality, students like Lisa, Bob, and Aurelia were alike in that they have access to more information to make their decisions about which program to enroll in than their peers in lower-status teacher education programs—many of whom enrolled in the first program they had heard of. In this way, their decision-making processes are both more information-rich and complex.

Logistical concerns. To a greater extent than students in business programs, students in higher-status teacher education programs additionally emphasize some of the same logistical

factors (e.g., the location and cost of programs) in their decision-making process as their peers in lower-status programs. The primary difference was that the students enrolled in higher-status teaching programs had more information at their disposal to make their decisions and to weigh the benefits of location and cost, relative to other factors like status and values alignment. For example, Gina reflects on the tradeoff of being out of the workforce to complete her graduate degree program, and prioritized a program that would provide her a pathway to both her graduate degree and teaching license accordingly:

> When I was looking at programs, I was looking for programs that would give me *both* the certification and the master's, because I thought if I'm gonna be out of the workforce for an X period of time, ideally selfishly for me, when I come out, I won't be behind, I guess.

In this way, many students prioritized shorter programs, given the trade-off of losing a year in the workforce. This was particularly true for the few students enrolled in higher-status teacher education programs after another career, rather than coming straight from their undergraduate program. For example, Bob notes: "I think my criteria was around like a length of time, so I didn't want to be out of work for too long. And I really…I did wanna be close by." The greater weight students in teaching place on location was, in part, driven by the fact that they knew that their program choice could have implications on their future employment opportunities with school districts. As Amanda reflects:

> I had researched other teacher [education] programs and I figured I wanted to study where I wanted to eventually teach. So that way I could get a feel for the state and the city. And see if that was something that somewhere that I wanted to be.

In this way, the occupational differences between teaching and business, especially the more localized nature of the teaching profession, may account for teachers placing a disproportionately greater emphasis on location in their program choice, amongst those in higher-status programs.

Values alignment. Students in higher-status teacher education programs frequently select programs based on their perceived values-alignment with their programs, in a way that is much less common to observe in business. These students internalize the widespread public narrative of teaching as a moral calling, and are motivated to become teachers in order to make a social impact on their communities (Kaul, 2024). As Tamara succinctly captures, "I was looking for a program that felt aligned with my values." To make those assessments, students in teaching looked to how different programs marketed themselves publicly, especially in terms of their program missions. Notably, both of the higher-status teacher education programs in this study had explicit public mission statements grounded in social justice. These public mission statements informed many of the students' decisions to apply, and ultimately enroll, in these programs. For example, Olivia reflects:

> [The program] has this huge focus on social justice, which definitely set it apart from other programs I looked at. I would say that all other teaching programs I looked at, had that component sort of like mentioned in the info sessions or something like that. But [at my program], it was really like, we are preparing you to be a social justice educator and that's gonna be a part of every single class you take. [...] It felt like it would really prepare me to connect with my students and to serve my students' families in a way that other programs wouldn't.

Other students reflected that they chose *not* to apply to other higher-status programs, because of their negative social reputation in their community. As Gina shares:

> I didn't apply to USC because I felt like, for a school that is gentrifying downtown Los Angeles, you know, neighboring Skid Row, I felt that there was a huge lack in acknowledgement of, "This is where we are at as a university."

In this way, perceived values-alignment serves as a key screening mechanism for students who enrolled in higher-status teacher education programs. Although there were limited cases of students in business being guided by values in their program selection, these dynamics were much more pervasive in the case of teaching. This is not surprising, given that the narrative of teaching as a moral calling is so pervasive in the occupation of teaching (Kaul, 2024; Santoro, 2011).

Career ceilings. Finally, students in higher-status teacher education programs grapple with the question of how they can leverage their degree to support their upward career mobility, simultaneously grappling with the limited opportunities for professional growth in the teaching profession. Unlike in business, where students often did not envision an upper bound to their potential career growth, some students in teacher education programs are already aware of the low occupational status of teaching upon enrolling in their programs, and it impacts their decision-making process around their graduate program selection. Even before entering their teacher education programs, these students consider potential opportunities for professional growth *beyond* teaching. For example, Blair reflects on how he weighs his concerns about the low professional status of teaching:

> I'd talked to [my] uncle who's in education about careers in education. And my concern had been where I come from. It's not seen as a very prestigious career and it's sort of a dead end. There's not a lot of professionalism in the field. And if you have a lot of ambition and if you're really bright, I was worried I would struggle with that as someone

> who wants to really advance and progress. This uncle has a Ph.D. [and] master's, has done research, has taught universities and high school, and he sort of assured me like, you can have a really good active career working with interesting people on interesting issues and with students in education.

Blair's comments reflect his belief that the occupation of teaching may not be able to accommodate his career aspirations as someone with "a lot of ambition" who is "really bright." This is not an isolated finding, but rather reflects a long-standing critique of the lack of a professional career ladder in the occupation of teaching (Lortie, 1975). Similarly, other students in teaching see the opportunities for professional growth as outside of teaching, with teaching serving as a potential stepping stone in that broader professional career trajectory. For example, Ada notes:

> Being able to do education, again, allows me to say, 'Oh, I can go into counseling and get additional certification and be able to benefit from that,' so that sounded great, slash, I know that [the university has] an education and policy program. When I saw that first, that's when I sort of did some more background and realized education would be a better fit in the beginning, and then from there, possibly coming back because it's easier to come back as an alumni, financially speaking. Because again, everything comes down to, what is the best stability for me, first financially, and then socially, and et cetera?

In this way, students enrolled in higher-status teacher education programs do think about their potential professional growth opportunities; however, the low occupational status of teaching limits their perception of growth opportunities *within* the teaching profession. These students still enroll in the higher-status teacher education programs with the belief that the degree might help

open the door to other, related career opportunities in parallel professions, such as higher education, education research, policy, or counseling.

Discussion

This paper identifies and describes the granular connections that exist between occupations and educational decision-making. In particular, we examine how workers draw on career values and expectations in order to navigate and choose among many master's programs in a given field and to what extent this relationship varies across occupations with different levels of prestige. We find that both occupational prestige and the status of graduate institutions shape students' program choice. In both occupational fields, we find that individuals' career values matter differently across well-recognized tiers of prestige. In lower-status programs, students in both business and teaching enter graduate school to pursue a credential that they hope will be viewed favorably by employers and help them advance incrementally along the same path. In higher-status programs, students pursue a credential that aligns more broadly with their broader professional values.

Together, the differences between these two cases allow us to disentangle the role of occupational and educational status in educational decision-making. Within each occupational field, respondents pursue identical credentials with different, career-linked motivations. Specific career values or expectations lead prospective students to seek a credential from a program in a certain tier of institutional prestige. Business students describe pursuing MBA degrees from elite institutions as a way to pivot into other influential occupations and untether themselves from one employer or specific occupation, even if their job is stable and highly paying. On the other hand, many students who attend higher-status programs see their occupation as a moral calling and attach importance to values-alignment in their decision-making process.

Our findings also suggest that the occupational status of fields shapes students' educational decisions. The low status of the teaching occupation and lack of opportunities for promotions within the teaching occupation put an upper-limit on the aspirations of students in teaching in seeking graduate degrees. Students in teaching, across both levels of institutional prestige, were seeking more technical capital (i.e., academic knowledge and skills development). However, MBA students enrolled in higher-status programs were largely seeking a more symbolic capital. Together, our two-part comparison highlights how the status of graduate programs and the overall occupational status of one's profession shapes individuals' choices regarding graduate school. Our findings contribute to literature on school-work linkages by describing how occupation and work shape educational decision-making. Further, the paper makes additional contributions about how occupational and educational status shape this process.

Our findings demonstrate how educational decision-making at the graduate level is informed by occupational status and individuals' career values. Dominant theories of educational decision-making at the graduate level describe a latent process of considering and selecting among programs that is consistent across fields of study. In this framework, prospective students, informed by their family and schooling background, develop an aspiration for graduate school, submit applications, and enroll in a program (English and Umbach, 2016; Mullen et al., 2003; Perna 2004). However, there are growing alternative perspectives in the sociology of education that seek to study young adults' "pathways" in and out of various combinations of school and work (Grodsky et al., 2021; Kizilcec et al., 2023). Our findings show that, in the two most common graduate fields of study, students are guided by their orientations to employment, specifically their perceptions of career mobility following their program. In both fields, "top" programs are not universally desired by applicants. Not only does a full-time elite program

provide a natural and explained break in employment, but students view elite business credentials as flexible credentials that facilitate horizontal mobility into new equally influential fields.

Our findings also suggest implications for future research and practice at the intersection of work, occupations, and education. Employers across different occupations can directly structure the process of program selection at the graduate-level. In the case of business occupations, master's programs function as a kind of external professional development that respondents expect to lead to promotions or changes in job duties. Even if employers subsidize the cost or a portion of the cost of tuition, employees still must make time for coursework outside of their working hours and often agree to stay on for a certain period of time in exchange for financial assistance. While some MBA respondents accepted employer help as a benefit or as a commitment to vertical growth within their firm, others chose not to accept given the conditions or forfeited assistance in order to change jobs. In the case of teaching, the value of master's degrees is largely predicated around the bureaucratic requirements for teacher licensure. Given the limited opportunities for professional growth in teaching, especially as compared to business, prospective graduate students in teaching are more drawn to graduate programs due to the requirements for them to be credentialed before having an entry-level teaching job. At the same time, we observed some students in teacher education programs who enrolled in graduate school with broader professional aspirations, largely *outside* of the teaching profession. These findings suggest that, in order to make the value of a graduate degree in teaching more appealing to prospective students, the occupational field of teaching must continue investing in building professional growth opportunities within the profession.

Prospective applicants read the same credential quite differently depending on institutional status; they anticipate that employers will also share their interpretation. Even full-time students are thinking of themselves in the context of their previous and future employers when they make decisions about where to go to graduate school and how to pay for it. Future research could study the ways in which students' orientation to their career progression shapes their educational decision making in other occupational fields, such as law or medicine, that have high professional status but with stronger social closure mechanisms than in business. Future research could also continue to examine the extent to which educational credentials from specific programs are linked with specific employment outcomes (DiPrete et al., 2017; Grodsky et al., 2021; Moss-Pech et al., 2021).

Given that we analyze two different occupations at opposite ends of the prestige spectrum that also align with the two most popular master's degrees, we can expect the findings to apply to program selection at the master's level more broadly. For example, the way that specific employers and contemporary employment dynamics structure the process of program selection are likely transferable across fields of study. However, our studies do not represent the full spectrum of variation within fields of study, occupations, or employers. Additionally, the extremely high earning potential that students in full-time elite business programs have access to is likely not the case in elite programs in other prominent master's fields (Bannon and Fuller, 2021).

There is also the possibility that students' career orientations are reinforced or even shaped by the programs they select into. Existing research finds that institutions imprint on students, creating graduates of that particular institution, and play a role in shaping students' outlooks about their future (Binder et al., 2016; Meyer, 1977). While the evidence presented here

does not entirely rule this out, especially in interviews of students closer to graduation, this is unlikely to be the primary explanation for the findings. Although our respondents are currently enrolled students, some students had not yet begun their first semester and had limited to no exposure to their future institutional contexts. Still, questions about the extent to which institutional context reinforces or shifts students' orientations about their future careers or perspectives on their program in relation to others could be taken up in future research.

Educational decision-making is also shaped by broader occupation-level shifts in the contemporary labor market that affect these two occupations differently. Prospective business students seek insurance in precarious white-collar employment situations and a precarious economy as a whole (Cooper, 2014; Kalleberg, 2009; Neely, 2022; Pugh, 2015). Even though the MBA respondents in this study are relatively well-paid and many work in jobs they feel are stable, work culture in this sphere can impose intense demands with no promise of employer loyalty. Given the instability that layoffs and sudden unemployment can cause (Rao, 2020; Sharone, 2014), advantaged workers seek security through additional credentials and capital (Cottom, 2017; Vallas and Christin, 2018).

On the other hand, with widespread teacher shortages, the value of a teaching credential may be declining. As schools across the nation navigate the growing challenge of teacher shortages, many states are increasingly turning to lowering the barriers to entry into the profession, even providing pathways to teach without a full credential. Given the public disinvestments in public education, the growing political attacks on teaching, and the precarious working conditions in K-12 public schools, teaching remains a low-status occupation. Unlike MBA students who may pursue additional credentials to *guard against* economic precarity, prospective teachers weigh the decision to enter an occupation which is itself precarious. In this

context, choosing to enroll in graduate education does not clearly offer a path out of economic precarity. A growing number of college-educated workers in various occupations are considering whether and how to pursue graduate credentials. Educational decision-making at the graduate level, in which students are also workers, offers an opportunity to consider how the institutions of education and occupation intersect, both at the organizational level and in the lives of young adults.

References

Abbott, A. (1991). The Order of Professionalization: An Empirical Analysis. *Work and Occupations, 18*(4), 355-384.

Abbott, A. (1988). The system of professions: An essay on the division of expert labor. The University of Chicago Press.

Altonji, J. G., & Zhong, L. (2021). The Labor Market Returns to Advanced Degrees. *Journal of Labor Economics*, *39*(2), 303–360. https://doi.org/10.1086/710959

Araki, S. (2020). Educational Expansion, Skills Diffusion, and the Economic Value of Credentials and Skills. *American Sociological Review*, *85*(1), 128–175. https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122419897873

Bannon, L., & Fuller, A. (2021, November 9). USC Pushed a $115,000 Online Degree. Graduates Got Low Salaries, Huge Debts. *Wall Street Journal*. https://www.wsj.com/articles/usc-online-social-work-masters-11636435900

Bennett, C. T. (2022). Labor market returns to MBAs from less-selective universities: Evidence from a field experiment during COVID-19. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, *n/a*(n/a). https://doi.org/10.1002/pam.22448

Bills, D. B., Di Stasio, V., & Gërxhani, K. (2017). The Demand Side of Hiring: Employers in the Labor Market. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *43*, 291–310.

Binder, A. J., & Abel, A. R. (2019). Symbolically Maintained Inequality: How Harvard and Stanford Students Construct Boundaries among Elite Universities. *Sociology of Education*, *92*(1), 41–58. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038040718821073

Binder, A. J., Davis, D. B., & Bloom, N. (2016). Career Funneling: How Elite Students Learn to Define and Desire "Prestigious" Jobs. *Sociology of Education*, *89*(20), 39.

BLS. (2025, April 18). *Business and Financial Occupations*. Occupational Handbook. https://www.bls.gov/ooh/business-and-financial/

Bol, T., Ciocca Eller, C., van de Werfhorst, H. G., & DiPrete, T. A. (2019). School-to-Work Linkages, Educational Mismatches, and Labor Market Outcomes. *American Sociological Review*, *84*(2), 275–307. https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122419836081

Bourdieu, P. (1986). The Forms of Capital. In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (pp. 241–258). Greenwood Press.

Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J.-C. (1977). *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*. SAGE Publications.

Chi, O. L., Bacher-Hicks, A., Tichnor-Wagner, A., & Baloch, S. (2023). Who Becomes a Teacher When Entry Requirements Are Reduced? An Analysis of Emergency Licenses in Massachusetts. *Educational Researcher*, 0013189X251346091.

Cochran-Smith, M. (2023). What's the "Problem of Teacher Education" in the 2020s?. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 00224871231160373.

Collins, R. (2019). The Credential Society: An Historical Sociology of Education and Stratification. In *The Credential Society* (3rd ed.). Columbia University Press. (Original work published 1979)

Comstock, M., Kaul, M., Dym, A., Lee, Y., & Kim, S. (2025). *Behind the push for licensure reform: How beliefs about the teaching profession unite and divide coalitions* (EdWorkingPaper No. 25-1219). Annenberg Institute at Brown University. https://doi.org/10.26300/nk71-1487

Cooper, M. (2014). *Cut Adrift: Families in Insecure Times*. University of California Press.

Cottom, T. M. (2017). *Lower ed: The troubling rise of for-profit colleges in the new economy*. The New Press.

Darr, A., & Mears, A. (2017). Locating local knowledge in global networks: Scouting in fashion and football. *Poetics*, *62*, 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2017.03.001

Deterding, N. M., & Waters, M. C. (2021). Flexible Coding of In-depth Interviews: A Twenty-first-century Approach. *Sociological Methods & Research*, 1–32. https://doi.org/10.1177/0049124118799377

DiPrete, T. A., Bol, T., Eller, C. C., & van de Werfhorst, H. G. (2017). School-to-Work Linkages in the United States, Germany, and France. *American Journal of Sociology*, *122*(6), 1869–1938. https://doi.org/10.1086/691327

Edwards, W., & Magill, K. R. (2024). The rise of for-profit teacher preparation programmes: investigating career outcomes for novice teachers. *Educational Review*, 1-25.

English, D., & Umbach, P. D. (2016). Graduate School Choice: An Examination of Individual and Institutional Effects. *The Review of Higher Education*, *39*(2), 173–211. https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2016.0001

Gerber, T. P., & Cheung, S. Y. (2008). Horizontal Stratification in Postsecondary Education: Forms, Explanations, and Implications. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *34*, 299–318.

Goldstein, D. (2015). *The teacher wars: A history of America's most embattled profession*. Anchor.

Grodsky, E., Doren, C., Hung, K., Muller, C., & Robert Warren, J. (2021). Continuing Education and Stratification at Midlife. *Sociology of Education*, *94*(4), 341–360. https://doi.org/10.1177/00380407211041776

Ho, K. Z. (2009). *Liquidated: An ethnography of Wall Street*. Duke University Press.

IES. (2024). *The Condition of Education: Postsecondary Education*. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/ctb/graduate-degree-fields

Kalleberg, A. L. (2009). Precarious Work, Insecure Workers: Employment Relations in Transition,. *American Sociological Review*, *74*, 1–29.

Kallio, R. E. (1995). Factors influencing the college choice decisions of graduate students. *Research in Higher Education*, *36*(1), 109–124. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02207769

Kaul, M. 2024. *The Making of a Professional: Institutional Logics of Teacher Education and Teacher Professional Identity Formation*. Doctoral dissertation, University of Pennsylvania.

Kizilcec, R. F., Baker, R. B., Bruch, E., Cortes, K. E., Hamilton, L. T., Lang, D. N., Pardos, Z. A., Thompson, M. E., & Stevens, M. L. (2023). From pipelines to pathways in the study of academic progress. *Science*, *380*(6643), 344–347. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.adg5406

Kirksey, J. J., & Gottlieb, J. J. (2024). *Teacher preparation in the wild west: The impact of fully online teacher preparation and uncertified teachers in Texas.* Texas Tech University [White paper]. Center for Innovative Research in Change, Leadership, and Education. https://hdl.handle.net/2346/97797

Krieg, J. M., Theobald, R., & Goldhaber, D. (2016). A foot in the door: Exploring the role of student teaching assignments in teachers' initial job placements. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 38*(2), 364-388.

Losee, C. I. (2021). Access to Graduate School: A Quantitative Study of Interest in Selective Mba Programs [Ed.D., University of Pennsylvania]. In *ProQuest Dissertations and*

Theses. https://www.proquest.com/docview/2572581447/abstract/A44D1A0F57B14A42PQ/1

Lovenheim, M. F., & Smith, J. (2022). Returns to Different Postsecondary Investments: Institution Type, Academic Programs, and Credentials. *National Bureau of Economic Research*. https://doi.org/10.3386/w29933

Ladd, H. F., & Sorensen, L. C. (2015). *Do master's degrees matter? Advanced degrees, career paths, and the effectiveness of teachers.* National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research. https://caldercenter. org/sites/default/files/WP% 20136_0. pdf.

Labaree, D. (2004). *The Trouble with Ed Schools.* Yale University Press.

Lortie, D. C. (1975). *Schoolteacher: A sociological study.* University of Chicago Press.

Mehta, J. (2013a). From bureaucracy to profession: Remaking the educational sector for the twenty-first century. *Harvard Educational Review, 83*(3), 463-488.

Mehta, J. (2013b). The allure of order: High hopes, dashed expectations, and the troubled quest to remake American schooling. Oxford University Press.

Meyer, J. W. (1977). The Effects of Education as an Institution. *American Journal of Sociology*, *83*(1), 55–77.

Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook.* Sage.

Moss-Pech, C., Lopez, S. H., & Michaels, L. (2021). Educational Downgrading: Adult Education and Downward Mobility. *Sociology of Education*, *94*(2), 143–158. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038040720982890

Mullen, A. L., Goyette, K. A., & Soares, J. A. (2003). Who Goes to Graduate School? Social and Academic Correlates of Educational Continuation after College. *Sociology of Education*, *76*(2), 143–169. JSTOR. https://doi.org/10.2307/3090274

NCES. (2021). *Table 323.10. Master's degrees conferred by postsecondary institutions, by field of study: Selected years, 1970-71 through 2019-20*. Digest of Education Statistics; National Center for Education Statistics. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d21/tables/dt21_323.10.asp

Neely, M. T. (2022). *Hedged out: Inequality and insecurity on Wall Street*. University of California Press.

Perna, L. W. (2004). Understanding the Decision to Enroll in Graduate School: Sex and Racial/Ethnic Group Differences. *The Journal of Higher Education*, *75*(5), 487–527. https://doi.org/10.1353/jhe.2004.0032

Posselt, J. R., & Grodsky, E. (2017). Graduate Education and Social Stratification. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *43*(1), 353–378. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-081715-074324

Pugh, A. J. (2015). *The tumbleweed society: Working and caring in an age of insecurity*. Oxford University Press.

Rivera, L. A. (2015). *Pedigree: How elite students get elite jobs*. Princeton University Press.

Rao, A. H. (2020). *Crunch time: How married couples confront unemployment*. University of California Press.

Ronfeldt, M. (2008). *Crafting core selves during professional education.* [Doctoral dissertation, Stanford University]. Proquest Dissertations & Theses Global.

Santoro, D. A. (2011). Good teaching in difficult times: Demoralization in the pursuit of good work. *American Journal of Education, 118*(1), 1-23.

Schleef, D. J. (2006). *Managing elites: Professional socialization in law and business schools*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Sharone, O. (2014). *Flawed system/flawed self: Job searching and unemployment experiences*. The University of Chicago Press.

Stafford, T. E. (2024). *Becoming a "good" teacher: Portraits of the moral and ethical dimensions of learning teaching* (Publication No. 31327454) [Doctoral dissertation, University of Washington]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

Strober, M. H., & Tyack, D. (1980). Why do women teach and men manage? A report on research on schools. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 5*(3), 494-503.

Tavory, I., & Winchester, D. (2012). Experiential careers: The routinization and de-routinization of religious life. *Theory and Society*, *41*(4), 351–373. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-012-9170-z

Timmermans, S., & Tavory, I. (2012). Theory Construction in Qualitative Research: From Grounded Theory to Abductive Analysis. *Sociological Theory*, *30*(3), 167–186. https://doi.org/10.1177/0735275112457914

Torche, F. (2011). Is a College Degree Still the Great Equalizer? Intergenerational Mobility across Levels of Schooling in the United States. *American Journal of Sociology*, *117*(3), 763–807. https://doi.org/10.1086/661904

Vallas, S. P., & Christin, A. (2018). Work and Identity in an Era of Precarious Employment: How Workers Respond to "Personal Branding" Discourse. *Work and Occupations*, *45*(1), 3–37. https://doi.org/10.1177/0730888417735662

Weber, M. (1978). *Economy and society: An outline of interpretive sociology (Vol. 1)*. University of California Press.

Weeden, K. A. (2002). Why do some occupations pay more than others? Social closure and earnings inequality in the United States. *American Journal of Sociology, 108*(1), 55-101.

Wilson, S. M., & Kelley, S. L. (2022). *Landscape of teacher preparation programs and teacher candidates.* National Academy of Education Committee on Evaluating and Improving Teacher Preparation Programs. National Academy of Education.

Wohl, H., & Besbris, M. (2024). Relational Brokerage: Interaction and Valuation in Two Markets. *Qualitative Sociology*, *47*(1), 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-023-09553-7