Exploring the Link Between Fun and Engagement in Financial Literacy

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This study examines the effectiveness of financial literacy event engagement by extending prior literature findings that indicate lower levels of financial literacy among non-white student populations. The authors created a campus-wide financial literacy fair, collaborating with the university's branding department to theme the event accordingly. At the fair, students were required to participate in a panel session, where they could ask industry experts questions about financial decisions, and then play financial-themed games led by their peers. Students earned tickets for prizes and free food by completing activities. Students could choose to opt in to having their demographic information accessed so the authors could analyze the demographics of the participants. Working with the institutional research office, the authors examined the demographics of student participants compared to the overall student population. The results suggest that incorporating fun into financial literacy event branding may attract populations in greater need of the content and resources provided.

Keywords: financial literacy, student debt, student engagement

INTRODUCTION

Financial literacy education has been identified for decades as a critical area of study to incorporate into higher education. Standards have been established in many countries to guide the content that should be included in financial literacy education. As the implementation of financial education in higher education continues to evolve, progress is being measured. Research suggests that financial knowledge is improving, although not equally across all demographics. For example, business students tend to test higher on financial knowledge exams because many of these topics are already covered in business finance courses, whereas students in other majors do not have consistent exposure to financial topics in higher education (Duarte, et al., 2022; Barrett et al., 2024). Additionally, gender differences remain nationwide in levels of financial literacy. Lusardi and Mitchell (2023) suggest that the gender differences in financial literacy are not only due to knowledge, but also self-confidence in the topic.

In response to these challenges, the authors initiated an annual campus-wide Financial Literacy Fair (Fair) designed to improve access to financial education resources and increase minority student confidence in financial decision-making. To encourage participation in the optional event, the Fair is a low-stakes, fun environment where students are encouraged to attend with friends. Following the findings and recommendations in the literature on improving financial literacy education, the financial education activities at the Fair are not managed by college professors, but rather by peers and industry professionals. Additionally, as recommended in previous research, financial incentives were offered for completion of financial education activities. And finally, an element of fun was incorporated into the event by creating a carnival/fair atmosphere.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Financial literacy is a critical component of individuals' financial well-being (Panos and Wilson, 2020). Mireku found that students with higher financial knowledge are more likely to make informed financial decisions and adopt sound practices in personal money management (2024), which can have a positive impact on life satisfaction and the overall economy (Lusardi, 2023). According to Harnisch (2010), a lack of financial understanding has even contributed to economic downturns such as the 2008-09 Great Recession.

Today's college students face a complex system of rising college costs and varied funding options. Increasingly, students are opting for student loans to help cover the costs of their education (Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, 2016). According to a 2022 Financial Wellness Student Voice survey, student loans are the most common type of loan in the U.S., with 54% of residents holding student loans in 2022. Fifty percent of respondents were either unaware of the amount of their student loans or were aware of the total but not of the monthly payments that would be required (College Pulse, 2024).

While student debt can be a helpful tool for increasing human capital, it can also lead to financial instability and reduced well-being (Rothstein & Rouse, 2011). In fact, students may sacrifice positive impacts of postsecondary education on reducing inequality when they increase their debt load (Cherney et al., 2020). Artavanis and Karra (2020) find that students with lower levels of financial literacy are more likely to underestimate future student loan payments. A study by Tergesen (2019) found that 11% of student loan borrowers default on their student loans within three years of graduation. Financial stress is also a primary reason that students drop out of college (Joo, Durband, and Grable, 2008).

Artavanis and Karra (2020) also find lower levels of financial literacy among female, minority, and first-generation college students. Because of this, Gupta et al. (2025) suggest that financial literacy programs should be designed to be inclusive of female participants and geared towards boosting female confidence in financial decision-making.

Recent research suggests that there is a lack of framework development to guide the creation of financial education programs, and that outcome measures of financial education primarily focus on financial knowledge rather than behaviors (Adesina et al., 2025). Another study finds that the form of the financial literacy education is more important than the number of financial literacy lessons (Böhm, et al., 2021). The authors created this study to contribute to the research on incorporating fun and welcoming environments into financial literacy education.

In creating the Fair, the authors incorporated three specific factors from the literature that have resulted in increased engagement in previous university financial literacy programs: peer-to-peer learning (Ma and Feng, 2018), industry engagement (Migliaccio, 2021), and financial incentives (Taylor et al., 2023). Shook and Keup (2012) find that peer-to-peer training programs benefit both the student participants and the community, as well as the student trainers. According to Migliaccio (2021), low- to middle-income individuals can benefit substantially not only from financial literacy programs but also from engagement with financial institutions and industry experts. Additionally, Taylor et al. (2023) found that monetary incentives are a strong motivator for participation and completion of financial literacy events among students.

In addition to the three factors previously identified in the literature, we also incorporated the element of fun through a welcoming, inclusive atmosphere, including giveaways, food, and t-shirts, to attract students and promote engagement and a sense of community on campus. These activities could ultimately contribute to a healthier economy for the geographic region served by the University. The authors have incorporated an analysis to compare demographic information about students who attend with demographic information about the overall student population to assess the impact of the Fair.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted at a regional university that serves a population in Appalachia, with a student body comprising nearly 40% first-generation students. The data for this study were obtained from student participants and the Office of Institutional Research at the university. The research objective was to identify the demographics of student participants at the Fair, helping us recalibrate the event to reach a broader target demographic of students in the future.

The authors consulted with the university branding department to develop the branding for the Fair. The logo created specifically for this event was a Ferris Wheel, designed to help students associate fun with financial literacy and to make the event feel inclusive of all students, including those with limited prior exposure to financial literacy. The Fair began with registration and continued to an auditorium session with an industry panel. After the auditorium session concluded, students entered a carnival-like setting to play financial literacy games, winning tickets for dinner and other prizes.

Industry engagement was incorporated into the event through the hosting of a panel of bankers at the beginning of the Fair. The students were very receptive to this in-person access to financial knowledge directly from industry experts. Students asked excellent and sometimes complex financial questions that were situation-specific. The banker panelists, many of whom were alumni of the University, provided thorough and helpful answers to the students. They also explained their role in the community, assisting community members with accessing financial resources, and provided contact information, encouraging students to reach out to them if they need assistance in the future.

After the auditorium session, students were dismissed to an open area where College of Business student organizations set up booths to engage attendees in games and activities that promoted awareness and knowledge about various financial literacy topics. Ma and Feng (2018) demonstrated that this type of peer-to-peer learning can improve college students' knowledge of financial literacy concepts. Along the way, students were also provided information to take with them about resources to help with financial issues.

An additional component of the event was incentives offered to participants. At the Fair, students were offered several opportunities to win prizes, as well as tickets for meals at multiple popular food trucks, if they completed all event activities.

All attendees were provided with an attendance card on which they were asked to record their student identification number (SID). On the card, they were asked to opt in or out for allowing us to use their SID to access demographic information from the Office of Institutional Research. Of 110 cards submitted, 105 students (or 95%) provided access. There were also some students who attended for at least part of the event and did not submit a card. After the event, the Office of Institutional Research provided a report that included the demographic information for opt-in students and averages for those same demographic variables for the entire university population.

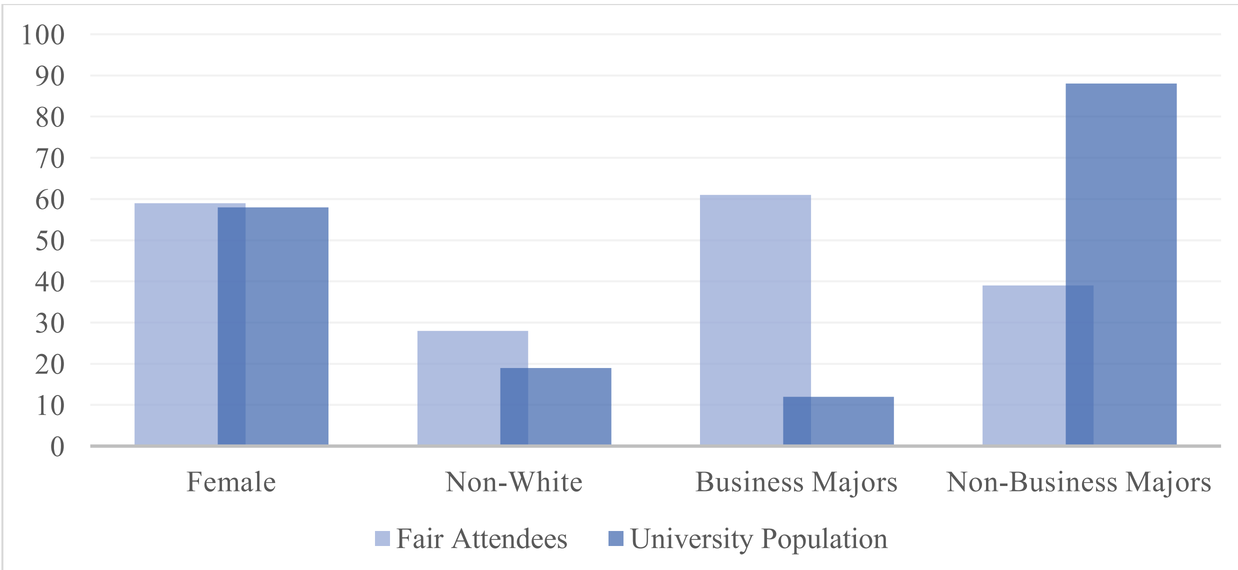
RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS

The results are presented in Figure 1. As shown in Figure 1, the Fair demonstrated increased minority attendance, with 28% of attendees identifying as non-white compared to 19% of the general student population. This is particularly significant given findings by Artavanis and Karra (2020), which highlights lower levels of financial literacy among minority students (24%) compared to the broader student sample (39.5%).

Furthermore, the percentage of female Fair attendees is 59%, which is roughly the same as the percentage of female students in the University population. This means the Fair was able to draw a second targeted demographic in a proportion equal to or greater than the overall university population.

Additionally, 61% of the students who attended the Fair were business majors, whereas only about 12% of the University's population are business majors. Since the event was hosted by the College of Business and business student organizations participated in the event, this is not surprising. However, the authors would like to see improvement in attendance among non-business majors, as they have lower levels of exposure to financial coursework than business majors.

FIGURE 1
FAIR DEMOGRAPHICS COMPARED TO UNIVERSITY POPULATION



The percentage of first-year Fair attendees was approximately 13% lower than that of the University population. The authors attribute the location of the Fair, which was across campus from the campus housing, as one of the possible reasons for the low first-year attendance. Future Fairs should be held in an area that is convenient and familiar for first-year students.

The percentage of second-year students was notably higher at 32% compared to the university population of 19% second-year students. The third-year Fair attendees were also significantly higher at 30% than the University population of 20% third-year students. The fourth-year student Fair attendance was lower than the University population by 10%. The results indicate impressive engagement among second- and third-year students, with room for improvement among first- and fourth-year students.

In addition to the demographic data collected from students, the Fair also received feedback from student attendees on the overall satisfaction with the Fair. The students reported that they overwhelmingly enjoyed the industry expert banker panel and requested that it be extended at the next Fair.

CONCLUSION

College students need financial education to prepare them to make good decisions after finishing their postsecondary education. This study provides a framework for a research-informed Financial Literacy Fair created by a collaborative team of business faculty. The framework incorporates peer-to-peer learning, industry engagement, and financial incentives from prior literature, and introduces a new aspect of fun to engage demographics of the University population who have lower financial literacy or financial confidence. The Fair attracted a higher percentage of female students, non-white students, and second- and third-year students compared to the overall percentage of students enrolled at the university. The findings indicate that the Fair was successful at attracting higher levels of non-white and minority students than the University population. However, the level of first year and fourth year students attracted was significantly lower. One reason for this could be that the location of the Fair was not convenient or familiar to first year students. Future Fairs should be held in a location that encourages engagement of the demographics with the greatest need for financial literacy engagement.

The sample size in this study is small, so caution should be exercised in applying conclusions drawn at this time. It is worth noting that this sample of students chose to attend the Financial Literacy Fair. This could mean that they are more interested in the topic and might have more knowledge than others who did not attend. Still, it could also mean that they are less knowledgeable or confident and attended the event to learn more about a content area in which they were weak. Either way, the results underscore the importance of allocating resources to equip students with more knowledge in this critical area, thereby improving lives and enhancing economic development in the region the university serves.

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