On a Friday morning, about a dozen undergraduate students gathered in a computer lab at the A. B. Freeman School of Business at Tulane University, under the watchful eye of Eric Hamerman, assistant professor of marketing, who administers the lab for the marketing faculty.

The students were directed to a website and asked to make various choices — everything from what to order for dessert, whether to go to a restaurant advertising a special, or which NFL replica jersey to buy. It may sound like an online shopping session, but in fact the students were participating in behavioral experiments designed to help researchers at the business school better understand the complexities of consumer decision making.

The business school's behavioral lab hosts dozens of such experiments each semester. The lab features 24 specially configured computer terminals that enable business school faculty to administer surveys, conduct experiments and collect the kind of behavioral research data that eventually ends up in peer-reviewed journals. In a very real sense, the behavioral lab is where the science of consumer psychology begins.

“This lab is very similar to what you have in psychology departments in the sense that there are professors who do behavioral experimentation,” says Hamerman.

Recent topics investigated in the lab include social media and its effect on purchase behavior, the effect of mood on consumer variety-seeking, alliteration in advertising, multitasking and purchase behavior, and the impact of the moral behavior of celebrities on product endorsements.

More than 300 students in business TIDES and core marketing courses participate in the studies each semester in exchange for class credit, and while students may not be right for every research project, Hamerman says they're ideal for consumer behavior research.

“Are Tulane students representative of everybody in the country? Probably not. But are they consumers? Absolutely. If you're studying human behavior and making choices, they're a fine population.”
Mark Miester is the editor of Freeman magazine for the A. B. Freeman School of Business.