Attachment 26

"Decided," "Undecided," and "In Transition": Implications for Academic Advisement, Career Counseling, & Student Retention"

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Introduction

The objective of this article is twofold: (a) to critically review research on how students' process of decision making with respect to selecting college majors and careers relates to their persistence in college, and (b) to tease-out practical implications of this research for improving the academic advisement, long-range planning, and retention of first-year students.

The majority of new students entering higher education leave their initial college of choice without completing a degree (Tinto, 1993), and national attrition rates have been increasing since the early 1980s at two-year and four-year institutions, both public and private (Postsecondary Education Opportunity, 2002). At all types of higher education institutions, including highly selective colleges and universities, the most critical period or stage of vulnerability for student attrition continues to be the first year of college ("Learning Slope," 1991). More than half of all students who withdraw from college do so during their first year (Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange, 1999), resulting in a first-year attrition rate of more than 25% at four-year institutions, and approximately 50% at two-year institutions (ACT, 2003).

Retention research suggests that student commitment to educational and career goals is perhaps the strongest factor associated with persistence to degree completion (Wyckoff, 1999). Given the increasing trend of new students to report that their number-one goal for attending college is "preparing for an occupation" (Astin, Parrot, Korn, & Sax, 1997), it becomes understandable that difficulty finding or committing to long-term goals will increase their risk for attrition. Furthermore, if students develop a viable plan for identifying a college major and related career that is compatible with their abilities, interests and values, then their overall level of satisfaction with college should increase. In turn, student retention at their chosen college should be increased, because there is a well-established empirical relationship between students' level of *satisfaction* with the postsecondary institution they are attending and their rate of *retention* at that institution (Noel, Levitz, & Saluri, 1985), i.e., college satisfaction is a "primary predictor" of student persistence (Noel & Levitz, 1995).

"Decided" and "Undecided" Students: Myths & Realities

A commonly held assumption in higher education is that students who are *undecided* about a college major are at greater risk for *attrition* than students with a declared major. As Diane Strommer notes, "Being undeclared is generally presumed to be an aberrant condition that needs fixing" (1997, p. 72). However, this prevalent belief is not well supported by empirical evidence. For example, Lewallen (1993) gathered data on a representative national sample of more than 18,000 first-year students from over 400 colleges and universities, while controlling for confounding variables known to affect student retention (e.g., academic preparedness and socioeconomic status). He discovered that knowledge of whether students were decided or undecided did not have any significant effect on predicting or explaining their retention. In a subsequent study, Lewallen (1995) examined a national sample of over 20,000 decided and undecided

students at six different types of postsecondary institutions, and he found that undecided students actually displayed higher levels of academic achievement (average GPA) and were more likely to persist to graduation than decided students. These findings are consistent with earlier research reported by Baird (1967), who conducted a large-scale study of college-bound seniors and found very few differences between undecided and decided students with respect to ACT scores and high school grade-point average. However, he did find that, relative to decided students, undecided students were more likely to emphasize intellectual development as a goal for attending college, and less frequently emphasized the goal of vocational or professional training.

The mistaken belief that undecided students are necessarily "at risk" students may have evolved from a misinterpretation of early research on student retention, which indicated that students who have low aspirations or lack commitment to educational and occupational goals are more likely to leave college (e.g., Astin, 1975; Noel, Levitz, & Saluri, 1985). Over time, these findings may have metamorphosed into a common conception that undecided (undeclared) students are *uncommitted* students who lack long-term academic plans, career goals, or sense of direction; thus, they are at risk for attrition. In fact, the term "undeclared" has acquired such a negative connotation that a TV sitcom about college students was created with that very name. (Although I have never seen a single episode of the sitcom, "Undeclared," I would still be willing to bet that it focused on college students who were academically clueless and directionless "party animals.")

The prevalent belief that being "undecided" equates with being "at risk" may also have evolved from an erroneous overgeneralization emanating from research findings which indicate that *prolonged* indecisiveness is empirically associated with increased risk for attrition (Raimst, 1981; Janasiewicz, 1987). However, the assumption that undecided students are *indecisive* students and prone to decisional procrastination, is both groundless and gratuitous. Students may be undecided for a variety of reasons, many of which are psychologically healthy, and which have nothing to do with absence of direction, lack of goal-orientation, or propensity for procrastination. As Virginia Gordon points out, "There are as many reasons for being undecided as there are students" (1984, p. 75). For instance, students may be undecided because they have diverse interests and are excited about multiple fields of study. Their indecision may simply reflect a high level of motivation for learning and active involvement in the productive process of critically evaluating and prioritizing their varied academic interests. Other undecided students may simply be deliberate, reflective thinkers, whose decision-making style predisposes them to gathering more information (e.g., by gaining first-hand experience with different academic disciplines) before making any long-term commitments. Empirical support for this contention is provided by a 25-year longitudinal study conducted at Ohio State University, involving over 19,000 students who were undecided about a major or career at college entry. Only 22% of these students indicated that they were "completely undecided," 31% said they were "tentatively decided," and 43% had "several ideas but were not ready to decide" (Gordon & Steele, 2003).

While the foregoing types of students have been generically categorized as "undecided," their healthy suspension of judgment and mature decision-making process suggests that the term "exploratory" or "investigative" would be a more accurate classificatory label. As J. R. R. Tolkein succinctly states in his influential trilogy, *Lord of the Rings*: "All who wander are not lost." (Fittingly, the National Academic Advising Association has established the Commission for "Undecided/Exploratory" Students,

a.k.a., CUES, to provide a national forum for discussion of issues relating to this student subpopulation.)

In contrast, some decided and declared students may be at greater risk for attrition than undecided students. James Powell, former president of Oberlin and Reed College, once said: "The kids who worry me are the ones who are so darn sure they know what they're going to be doing" (quoted in Pope, 1990, p. 180). These students might indeed be a legitimate source of concern (and potential attrition) because they may have made a decision that is (a) *premature*—reflecting lack of careful planning and forethought; (b) *unrealistic*—resulting from lack of self-knowledge (e.g., accurate awareness of personal aptitudes), or (c) *uninformed*—resting on insufficient knowledge about the relationship between academic majors and future careers.

Furthermore, students' early decisions may be driven entirely by *extrinsic* factors (e.g., pleasing parents or maximizing income) rather than by careful introspection and choice of a major or career that is congruent with their *intrinsic* interests, abilities, and values. Upcraft, Finney, and Garland (1984) point out that early decisions about majors and careers may result from, "Students [being] pushed into careers by their families, while others have picked one just to relieve their anxiety about not having a career choice. Still others may have picked popular or lucrative careers, knowing nothing of what they're really like or what it takes to prepare for them" (p. 18).

Major *Changers*

Students who *change majors* have also been classified under the generic rubric, "undecided," and they, too, are commonly deemed to be at risk for attrition. However, research has not demonstrated that risk for college withdrawal is associated with doubt or indecision about an initial major and eventual change of that major. In fact, some studies demonstrate that students who change majors actually display higher rates of retention (persistence to graduation) than non-changers. For instance, research reported by Micceri (2002), based on student tracking of major changers in the Florida State University System, revealed that students who change majors at least once during their college experience proceed to graduate at a rate ranging between 70-85%, while students who hold on to their original major display a retention rate of 45-50%. These findings replicate earlier research conducted by Anderson, Creamer, & Cross (1989), who found that major changers attempt and complete more credit hours than "decided" students.

These findings suggest that changing decisions about a major is not necessarily a negative phenomenon, but may represent student discovery of other academic fields that stimulate greater personal interest or that are more compatible with their personal aptitudes and abilities. Also, major changing may reflect an underlying process of cognitive maturation among college students, and their natural progression to more advanced developmental stages of decision-making. As Tinto notes, "Movements from varying degrees of certainty to uncertainty and back again may in fact be quite characteristic of the longitudinal process of goal clarification which occurs during the college years. Not only should we not be surprised by such movements, we should expect, indeed hope, that they occur" (1993, p. 41).

Naturally, there is a downside to changing majors, if the change takes place at a late juncture in the college experience. This can result in delayed time to graduation because of the need to complete additional courses required by the newly chosen major. So, while changing majors may contribute positively to the outcome of *persistence* to graduation, it

may adversely affect the outcome of *time to* graduation—if the change occurs after a sizable number of credit hours have been accumulated in a previous major.

Shadow **Majors**

"Shadow" majors may be defined as students who are decided on a major, but have not yet been accepted or admitted to the major of their choice. Certain majors, because of their popularity, are oversubscribed or "impacted" (e.g., business, engineering, pre-med, and allied health sciences), so departments may attempt to control their enrollment by limiting access only to students who have achieved superior grades in highly competitive ("killer") prerequisite courses, or by admitting only students who have achieved a certain grade-point average in all pre-major courses. In effect, shadow majors are students who have already met the university's admissions standards, but have yet to meet the standards of "second-tier" admission into their intended field of study. These students may eventually transition into their major of choice, or they may be shutout of their intended major if they fail to meet the specific standards imposed by its department. When the latter happens, these already "decided" majors often resist the prospect of changing majors, because "they may feel they are letting someone down or shattering a lifelong dream" (Gordon & Steele, 1992, p. 24). As a result, they may end-up "drifting along without an academic home, semester after semester, making 'satisfactory progress'—but not toward a degree" (Strommer, 1993, p. 14).

Although there is little empirical evidence available on the retention rate of shadow majors who have been denied entry into their "decided" field of study, it is reasonable to expect that they may be at risk for attrition due to loss of their long-term goal and, perhaps, loss of commitment to the process (higher education) which represented their path to that goal. Even if rejected shadow majors eventually accept the reality of their rejection, proceed to an alternative major, and persist to graduation, their delayed change to an alternative major may delay their graduation because of the need to fulfill additional courses required by their late choice of a new major.

Implications for Future *Research & Assessment*

The foregoing research reviewed in this article suggests that historic interest in the question of *whether* students are decided or undecided about a major may be less important than questions about *when* and *how* students decide on a major. Looking toward future research and assessment on the academic decision-making process, it appears as if not much more is to be gained from the traditional approach of categorizing students as either "decided" or "undecided" and computing correlations between this dichotomous variable and student retention. As Lewallen notes, "Because few differences have been found [between decided and undecided students], it appears that undecided students represent more a microcosm of the college population than a highly distinguishable group" (1994, p. 12). It may now be time to engage in research on the *process* of how students go about deciding on a major (or deciding to remain "undecided") and move toward longitudinal assessment of *when* students reach these decisions during their college experience. Admittedly, this is a challenging task that will require the use of more time-consuming, labor-intensive *qualitative* research methods, such as: (a) focus group interviews with decided and undecided students at different stages of the college experience, and (b) narrative analysis of advisors' notes (written or electronic) on their meetings with advisees—to detect thematic patterns in how, why, and

when students reach final decisions about college majors—in order to assess relationships between different patterns of student decision-making and student retention. A good illustration of the type of useful information that may be generated by such qualitative assessment is a study conducted at a large research university that involved personal interviews with 16 "advanced" undecided students—i.e., students who had completed more than one-third of the minimum number of units needed for graduation. These in-depth interviews revealed that a major roadblock for most undecided students with advanced class standing was an unrealistic view about the long-term consequences of committing to a major. Namely, these students believed that selecting a major should "give them answers to all of the questions about what they want to do with their lives [and would] send them down an unchangeable career path, one they would be committed [to] for life" (Hagstrom, Skovholt, & Rivers, 1997, p. 29).

Another potentially fertile area for future research is assessment of whether different institutional attitudes and policies toward undecided students affect their decision-making process and persistence to graduation. National survey research suggests that there is appreciable variability in terms of how colleges and universities approach student decision-making about a college major. Some institutions require or strongly encourage first-year students to declare a major, some discourage it, and others take a laissez-faire approach (Policy Center on The First Year of College Year, 2003). Lewallen (1995) notes that variations in institutional attitude toward undecided students can have significant impact on their initial decision-making process and their subsequent experience: "Some institutions are extremely supportive; others are indifferent or even nonsupportive. These approaches appear to have the potential to profoundly influence a student's willingness to declare being undecided. Additionally, these approaches have the potential to influence the college achievement and experiences of undecided students" (pp. 28-29).

Implications for College Practices & Policies

When establishing college policies and advising practices that impact undecided students, it may be necessary decision-makers and advisors to remain cognizant of the following research findings: (a) Three of every four students are uncertain or tentative about their career choice at college entry (Titley & Titley, 1980; Frost, 1991). (b) Among first-year students who enter college with a major in mind, less than 10% feel they know "a great deal about their intended major" (Lemoine, cited in Erickson & Summers, 1991). (c) Uncertainty among new students frequently increases rather than decreases during their first two years of college (Tinto, 1993). (d) Over two-thirds of entering students change their major during their first year (Kramer, Higley, & Olsen, 1993). (e) Between 50-75% of all students who enter college with a declared major change their mind at least once before they graduate (Foote, 1980; Gordon, 1984; Noel, 1985). (f) Only one senior out of three will major in the same field they preferred as a freshman (Willingham, 1985).

These high levels of student uncertainty and propensity for changing educational plans have been reported at all institutional types, including selective private universities (Marchese, 1992), large research universities ("What We Know About First-Year Students," 1996; What Do I Want to Be," 1997), and small liberal arts colleges ("Alpha Gives Undecided Students a Sense of Identity," 1996).

Such findings strongly suggest that final decisions about majors and careers do *not* occur *before* students enter college; rather, students make these decisions *during* the college experience. Thus, it is not accurate to assume that students who enter college with "declared" majors are truly "decided" majors; instead, it is probably more accurate to conclude that 75% of all students entering college are actually undecided about their academic and career plans, and at least half of all students with declared majors are "prematurely decided" majors—who will eventually change their minds. In his doctoral dissertation, Willard Lewallen notes the implications of these findings for postsecondary institutions: "Clearly, the time has come to formally recognize in our policies and practices that the majority of entering students are in an undecided mode. Being undecided is not the exception, but rather the norm" (1992, p. 110). The fact that such large numbers of students change their initially chosen major—coupled with research findings indicating that students who change majors are as likely, or more likely, to attain good grades and persist to graduation—serve to support institutional policies that encourage students to postpone initial decisions about an academic major until they gain more self-knowledge and more personal experience with the college curriculum.

The extant research literature also suggests that students are more prone to making impulsive or premature decisions about their major than they are to procrastinate indefinitely about these decisions. Farvell and Rigley (1994) note that "the well-intentioned question asking, 'What are you going to major in at college?' asked frequently enough by family and by advisers can lead students to believe they are somehow deficient because they have not yet chosen an academic major" (p. 37). Unfortunately, some institutions may be exacerbating this propensity for premature or impulsive decision-making by urging or requiring new students to declare a major at college entry or during the first year of college. For instance, Gordon notes that, "Many institutions allow entering students to specify on an admissions form if they are undecided about an academic program. Others do not recognize "undecidedness" as a condition of enrollment" (1995, p. 93). Even institutions that allow entering students to specify "undecided" on their admissions form often still strongly encourage or require their students to declare a major within the first year. A national survey of nearly 1,000 institutions conducted by the Policy Center on The First Year of College (2003) revealed that approximately 44% of colleges and universities either "strongly encourage" or "require" first-year students to select a major.

By electing not to declare a major, undecided students may be left "homeless," i.e., left without an academic department, organizational niche, or administrative division that they can call their own. Such institutional practice may discourage first-year students to remain undecided, and tacitly encourage them to make hasty decisions in order to meet institutional expectations that they should be "decided" and housed in an academic department. As Susan Frost notes, "In institutions that urge all freshmen to declare a major, undecided students might be reluctant to identify themselves and remain underserved. If college is to encourage students to develop the capacity to judge wisely, then perhaps freshmen should defer selecting a major until later in their college careers" (1991, p. 32). Erickson and Strommer concur: "We would do well to treat each one our entering freshmen as an undecided student. Institutions that extend substantial career/life planning and academic services to all freshmen can expect to achieve significant improvements in retention rates" (1991, p. 74). Thus, policy makers need to remain

cognizant of the fact that beginning college students need adequate "incubation" time for their major and career plans to crystallize.

When formulating institutional polices and practices about undecided students, decision-makers also need to remain mindful of the purpose of *general education*, and the important role it plays in facilitating and informing student decisions about academic majors by introducing new students to a breadth of academic disciplines and a variety of potential majors, many of which they never encountered, or even heard of, prior to college. As Gordon and Steele (2003) point out, "Exploration through coursework is perhaps the most basic and important advising tool" (p. 30). Expecting students to reach final decisions about college majors before having sufficient experience (or any experience) with the process of general education, and the courses that comprise the liberal arts curriculum, may be viewed as devaluation of one of the major missions of higher education. It may also be seen as a disturbing disservice to a critical component of the college experience—one that provides the formative foundation and transferable skills which are essential for success in any college major and any career. Virginia Gordon argues that the first year, in particular, is a "critical time [for students] to learn how to gather information about their academic strengths and limitations and how they can incorporate these strengths into various major and occupational alternatives. They can experience the thrill of discovery and hone the skills of critical thinking and information management. The first year in college should be the time when students begin to lay the foundation for a lifetime of career choice and maintenance" (1995, p. 99).

Predictably, liberal arts colleges are the most likely to value the general education experience by encouraging students to *postpone* selection of a major until the sophomore year. In contrast, two-year colleges are the postsecondary institutions that are most likely to "strongly encourage" or "require" major selection in the first year (Policy Center on the First Year of College, 2003). The latter finding is a disturbing one because two-year colleges are the very institutions that enroll the highest percentage of academically under-prepared, under-experienced (first-generation), and under-represented (minority) students (Striplin, 1999). From the community colleges' perspective, it is understandable why students are encouraged to make early decisions about a field of interest, because entering students often must decide between embarking on either a vocational-track or transfer-track curriculum. Moreover, if community college students intend to transfer successfully to baccalaureate-granting institutions, it may be necessary for them to complete all pre-major requirements (in addition to their developmental course work and general education requirements) to qualify for admission, particularly if they are applying for admission to popular universities or to academic majors that are oversubscribed or "impacted." For example, the University of California system now expects all two-year college graduates to complete 60 transferable units, including all areas of its general education curriculum and all pre-major courses in the student's chosen field of study. For majors that require completion of numerous pre-major courses prior to transfer (e.g., business, engineering, and health sciences), this policy essentially forces full-time, continuously enrolled, community college students to select a major and begin their sequence of pre-major coursework during the *first term* of college—if they expect to transfer to a four-year university in a reasonable period of time. The ugly irony associated with this policy is that it exerts the most academic decision-making pressure on students in community colleges, which enroll the highest percentages of academically under-prepared and economically disadvantaged students (Roueche & Roueche, 1993; Cohen &

Brawer, 2002). Laura Rendon points out the danger of such policies for under-represented students: "Minorities often exhibit a naiveté about the costs and benefits of the higher education system, and may find out they are committing themselves to goals they don't full understand" (1994, p. 30).

Institutional policies that "push" students into making early or premature commitments to an academic specialization also fail to acknowledge (a) the reality of academic uncertainty that exists among the majority of first-year students, and (b) the process of self-discovery that is so essential to personal development during the formative years of college. As Vince Tinto observes, "The regrettable fact is that some institutions do not see student uncertainty in this [exploratory] light. They prefer to treat it as a deficiency in student development rather than as an expected part of that complex process of personal growth. The implications of such views for policy are not trivial" (1993, p. 41).

Research and theory on the cognitive and psychosocial development of college students strongly suggests that the majority of first-year students have not yet reached a stage of intellectual maturity at which they are most capable of making well-reasoned educational and occupational decisions. For instance, Perry (1970, 1998) discovered through in-depth interviews with college students during different years in the undergraduate experience that first-year students are at a "basic duality" stage of cognitive development, during which the world is seen in dual terms—right or wrong, with correct answers being absolute and known by authorities. Multiple viewpoints, diversity of opinions, and different theoretical perspectives are seen as bothersome or confusing. Typically, it is during the sophomore year when students begin to appreciate relativistic thinking, i.e., that multiple factors and perspectives need to be weighed in order to understand an issue, phenomenon, or decision. During the second year of college, students begin to understand that the uncertainty and potential chaos associated with relativistic thinking may be managed by making well-reasoned decisions and commitments.

Perry's findings are reinforced by the work of Baxter-Magdola (1992), who conducted open-ended interviews with students from the first to final year of college. She reports that sophomores are at a stage of "transitional knowing," transitioning from the absolute thinking of the first year to the independent and contextual thinking that peaks during the junior and senior years of college.

Boston and DuVivier (cited in Evenbeck et al., 2000), conducted focus-groups interviews with students at Purdue University and found that sophomores reported moving from being defined in the eyes of their parents to deciding what was best for themselves. They felt that the first year of college provided them with the opportunity for self-analysis, from which emerged a sense of commitment to self-determination. The outcome of this developmental process often resulted in a change of plans about their academic major or a renewed commitment to their original goal.

These findings on the maturation of students' decision-making processes are consistent with Arthur Chickering's developmental theory of college student identity (Chickering, 1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993), which postulates that the developmental tasks encountered in the first year of college center around developing intellectual, physical, and social competence, along with emotional independence. Chickering argues that higher education forces first-year students to make these decisions before they have developed the personal identity on which sound decisions are based. He contends that

development of personal identity, long-term educational plans, and career purpose arises later in the undergraduate experience for the majority of college students.

Chickering's theory is supported by the empirical work of Gardner (2000), whose surveys of students at different stages of the college experience revealed that their conversations during the first year most often focused on college courses, personal problems, and campus issues. In contrast, sophomores reported spending significantly less time on these issues and substantially more time on career and major concerns.

Strategies for Enhancing the Quality of First-Year Students' Major/Career Planning and Decision-Making

1. Provide strong *incentives* for *first-year students to meet regularly* with their advisors.

At the very least, students should be required to see an advisor in order to register for courses. At some 4-year colleges and many community colleges, students can register for classes without ever seeing an academic advisor (e.g., via electronic or telephonic registration). Leaving first-year students on their own to design an educational plan and to select courses relevant to that plan, means that students completely bypass the advising process, along with its retention-promoting potential. This is a risky procedure to employ with any undergraduate student, but it is a especially risky for first-year students, who lack experience with higher education and familiarity with the college curriculum.

Strong incentives should also be provided (e.g., priority registration) for students who meet with advisors at times other than the hurried and harried period of course registration. Meetings need to take place at times when advisors have sufficient time to interact with students as persons—rather than "process" them as registrants, and when advisors have the opportunity to explore or clarify students' broader, long-term educational plans—rather than focusing narrowly, myopically, and episodically on the imminent, deadline-driven task of class scheduling.

2. Identify *highly effective advisors* and *"front load"* them—i.e., position them at the front (start) of the college experience to work with first-year students.

In a landmark report on the quality of undergraduate education issued by the National Institute of Education (1984), its panel of distinguished scholars' first recommendation for improving undergraduate education was "front loading", which they define as the reallocation of faculty and other institutional resources to better serve first-year students. Delivery of high-quality developmental advising during the first-semester of college is one way to implement the principle of front-loading and promote student persistence to graduation. The value of front-loading effective advisors to promote the retention of first-year students is noted by Lee Noel, who argues that "the critical time in establishing the kind of one-to-one contacts between students and their teachers and advisers that contribute to student success and satisfaction occur during the first few weeks of the freshman year" (1985, p. 20).

Moreover, front-loading our most effective and committed advisors to work with first-year students can be expected to result in their making more thoughtful, more accurate, *initial* choices about majors and careers. This would serve not only to promote student retention, but it may also reduce the probability of premature decision-making, which can eventuate in changing of majors at later stages in the college experience. Prolonged indecisiveness and late changing of majors can result in delayed progress toward degree

completion by necessitating completion of additional courses to fulfill specific degree requirements for a newly chosen major. This may be one factor contributing to the extended length of time it now takes college students to complete their graduation requirements (U.S. Bureau of Census, 1994); the number of students taking five or more years to graduate from college doubled between the early '80s and '90s (Kramer, 1993). Data collected by the U.S. Department of Education indicate that, for the student cohort who entered college in 1995 with the intention of earning a bachelor's degree, only 37% completed that degree within four years, while 63% took six years (Arenson, 2003). Intrusive and proactive delivery of high-quality advising during the first college of year may be expected to reduce delays in graduation, as well as the cost of college education, due to late major-changing stemming from unwise or unrealistic choice of an initial major.

3. Promote early academic and career planning by infusing it into the *first-year curriculum*.

This may be accomplished by adding a course to the curriculum that is devoted exclusively to the topic of academic and career planning, or by including the topic as an integral component of a first-year seminar. In such courses, students can engage in classroom activities or complete course assignments that involve long-term *educational and career* planning, serving to *connect* their *present* college experience with their *future* goals and aspirations. For instance, an assignment could be created that asks first-year students to develop an *undergraduate* plan, which includes courses in general education and pre-major courses in an academic field that the student intends to major in or is considering as a possible choice. This assignment could also include tentative *post-baccalaureate* plans for graduate school, professional school, or immediate career entry, which encourage students to (a) identify potential positions, (b) construct a skeletal or model resume that would prepare them for entry into such positions, and (c) initiate a personal *portfolio*—a collection of materials that illustrates student competencies or achievements, and demonstrates educational or personal development—for example: written work, artistic products, research projects, letters of recommendation, co-curricular accomplishments, personal awards, and certificates of achievement.

Norwich University (Vermont) uses its first-year seminar in this fashion to engage students in long-range educational planning and promote student dialogue with their academic advisors about their educational plans. The first-year seminar syllabus at Norwich calls for students to meet with their advisor on three occasions during the first semester, in addition to their meeting for course scheduling. The second meeting occurs at about the midpoint in the semester, at which time students bring a self-assessment report that they have completed as a first-year seminar assignment. Advisors use this report to focus discussion with students about their present academic progress and future educational plans (Catone, 1996).

Marymount College (CA), a 2-year institution devoted exclusively to preparing students for successful transfer to baccalaureate degree-granting colleges and universities, requires a first-year seminar for all its incoming students. The Director of the Advisement and Transfer Center visits each class and outlines for students the course requirements of different 4-year institutions for general education and different academic majors. Following this classroom visitation, first-year seminar students are given an assignment carrying significant point value that requires them to meet with their academic advisor

during the first 4-6 weeks of their first term to develop a general-education plan that includes what courses they are planning to take and when they are planning to take them—fall, spring, or summer. (Students and advisors receive a three-year institutional plan of projected of fall, spring, and summer course offerings to assist them in this long-range planning and scheduling process.) Students are also supplied with a form or grid with blank lines for courses to be taken during the next two-to-three years. Students meet with their advisor to complete a tentative, personal 2- to 3-year plan that includes general-education requirements for the associate degree (A.A. or A.S.) and pre-major requirements for their intended field of specialization. (For students who are completely undecided about an intended major, they are advised to identify elective course in academic fields which they might consider as a possible major, or minor, in order to test their interest and aptitude for that academic field.)

The student's educational plan is completed on a triplicate form, one copy of which is kept by the advisor, one copy is kept by the student, and the third copy is returned by the student (along with a written reflection on the plan) to the first-year seminar instructor who accepts it as a completed course assignment and credits it toward the student's course grade. Students almost invariably report in their written evaluations of this long-range planning assignment that it had a motivating effect on them, often claiming that the plan made their academic goals more concrete, and that it provided them with a visible "road map" of their educational future. Students also frequently comment that the assignment enabled them to either confirm their plans or modify them while there was still time to do so. For example, students frequently report that they did not have a clear idea about what specific courses were required for their intended major and the assignment made them realize that these course were not compatible with their personal interests, abilities, or values (Cuseo, 2001).

Another advantage of promoting early academic and career planning within the context of a first-term course is that it allows for *continuity of contact* between the course instructor and new students *throughout their initial term* of college enrollment. This continuous contact enables the instructor to closely monitor the progress of new students during their critical first semester, and allows sufficient time for bonding to take place between students and teacher. If it can be arranged for new students' *academic advisors* to serve as *course instructors* in a first-year seminar, then the course can serve as a conduit for providing close and continuous contact between student and advisor during the critical first term of the college experience. Presently, 20% of institutions offering first-year seminars have arranged for students to be placed into sections of the course taught by their academic advisors (National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience, 2002), thus ensuring regular advisor-advisee contact during the critical first term.

Research conducted at North Dakota State University indicates that, if new students' academic advisors also serve as their first-year seminar instructors, students make significantly more *out-of-class* contact with their academic advisor during their first term than students whose advisors do not co-serve as first-year seminar instructors (Soldner, in Barefoot et al., 1998).

4. *Integrate* the Offices of *Academic Advisement* and *Career Counseling*

New students need support to integrate the tasks of selecting an academic major and planning for a future career. As Tinto emphatically states: "It is part of the educational mandate of institutions of higher education to assist maturing youth in coming to grips

with the important question of adult careers" (1993, p. 41). Yet, according to a national report released by the Wingspread Group (1993), few campuses have created one-stop "success centers" where students can receive integrated assistance, such as integrated assistance from academic advisement and career development services.

5. Establish an *Office, Center,* or *Organizational Unit* for the Advisement of *Undecided (Exploratory) Students*

In their 25-year longitudinal study of nearly 20,000 first-year students, Gordon and Steele (2003) discovered that 85% of undecided students at college entry report being "somewhat anxious" or "very anxious" about choosing a major, and approximately 50% of "completely decided" students indicated that they were "very anxious." These findings suggest that new students need a safe and supportive sanctuary to engage in the academic exploration and decision-making process. At many colleges, academic advising is handled by discipline-based academic departments, which either leaves undecided students without a designated home or arbitrarily remands them for assignment to an academic department that may have little or no relation to their eventual field of interest. Such an assignment is not likely to provide undecided students with the support structure needed to reflectively investigate their academic and career options (Hart, 1995).

It may be that some institutions pressure first-year students, either tacitly or explicitly, into making an early commitment to a major, simply for the self-serving and institutionally convenient purpose of channeling them into academic departments—where they are advised by discipline-based faculty advisors. Habley (1994) observers that, "Some faculty-only systems virtually ignore the developmental needs of undecided students either by assigning them at random to faculty members throughout the campus, or by using undecided students to level the advising load of faculty in departments with fewer majors" (p. 19). Unfortunately, many faculty advisors do not have the time, interest, or expertise to facilitate the process of major and career exploration. (I say this as a faculty member who values academic advising and enjoys advising first-year students. Nevertheless, it must be said, because graduate education does not adequately prepare faculty for their role as advisors, and their home institutions often compound the problem by failing to systematically orient, develop, and reward faculty for engaging in the type of high-quality developmental advising that enables students to arrive at mature, thoughtful decisions about their majors and careers.) As Derrell Hart observes: "Entering students often do not have a real area of study in mind. This suggests that entering college students, at a minimum, should have ready access to persons trained as career counseling and advising generalists rather than only to discipline-based faculty. Expecting teaching faculty to meet the unique advising needs of entering students, given other expectations and demands on their time, is unrealistic" (1995, p. 76, 81).

A good illustration of an organizational unit that has been intentionally designed to support undecided students is Kent State University's Undergraduate Studies (US) unit, which houses a Student Advising Center (SAC) created for undeclared majors—who are referred to as "exploratory majors." SAC houses a computer lab equipped with career interest assessments and inventories, and a team of eight full-time advisors specifically trained to guide "exploratory" students (Kuhn, Howard, & Matyas, 1996). Similarly, Pace University (NY) has created an "Office of Transitional Advising" specifically for "undecided majors," which serves as a resource center for students who (a) have not yet declared a major, (b) want to change majors, and (c) need to leave a major because of

academic reasons and find another one. Among the services provided by this office are: (a) connecting students with faculty, staff, and student liaisons, (b) providing student opportunities to observe classes that will expose them to different fields of study, (c) delivering workshops on academic goal clarification, (d) providing guidance on the relationships between academic majors and careers, and (e) making referrals to university programs, services, campus events, and student clubs (Schmid, 2001).

6. Create *Experiential* Learning Opportunities for First- and Second-Year Students to Promote Early Awareness of the *Realities* of Work in Different Careers

This may be accomplished by such practices as having students: (a) *interview* professionals in different career positions, (b) *shadow* different career professionals during a "typical" workday, and (c) *volunteer* or engage in *service learning* in different settings. As John Gardner (2002) argues, "The working relationship among service-learning programs and units responsible for providing career planning needs to be strengthened and made more intentional" (p. 147).

Guest panelists may also be invited into the classroom to share their experiences (e.g., in freshman seminars or career-planning courses). Potential invitees include: (a) college seniors majoring in different academic fields, (b) alumni who graduated with different college majors, (c) faculty representing different academic disciplines, and (d) trustee members or other working professionals representing different careers.

These human resources may also be invited to a central place on campus, as part of an integrated "major and career fair." Assignments could be crafted in freshman seminars, career planning courses, or other first-year courses, which reward students for participating in and reflecting on this event.

Conclusion

Research reviewed in this article strongly suggests that *intentionally* designed interventions are needed to improve the effectiveness of first-year students' academic decision-making and career planning. These institutional interventions will likely have the most salutary impact if their delivery is *intrusive*, i.e., if the college *initiates* supportive action by *reaching out* to new students and bringing support to them, rather than passively offering programs and hoping that students will come to take advantage of them on their own accord.

Intrusive delivery is perhaps most effectively achieved when support is channeled through the curriculum, via courses that encourage and reward students to engage in meaningful academic and career planning. The practice of offering programmatic support in the form of a *graded, credit-bearing* course has the advantage of promoting the program's *credibility* in the eyes of students. The program's content will more likely be seen as central to a college education and comparable in importance to content covered in other courses that comprise the college curriculum. Furthermore, when programmatic support is delivered through a course in the curriculum, the course grade can serve as a strong motivational *incentive* for elevating students' *level of effort and depth of involvement* with respect to the program's content, as well as elevating *instructor expectations* of the amount of time and energy that students should devote to its content. Both of these consequences should serve to magnify the program's potential for exerting positive effects on student learning, development, and success.

Support programs are also more likely to have significant impact when their delivery is *proactive*, i.e., when *early* and *preventative* action is taken that addresses students' needs in an *anticipatory* fashion—before they eventuate in problems that require reactive intervention. It is evident from research reviewed in this article that first-year students need support in the area of academic and career decision-making. Moreover, providing programmatic support in the *first term* of college may impact students' level of involvement with the support program during their remaining years in college. It is reasonable to hypothesize that a proactively delivered, academic decision-making and career-planning program experienced by students during their first term on campus, will serve to stimulate subsequent student involvement with the program, enabling it to exert recurrent and cumulative effects on student development throughout the undergraduate experience.

Lastly, an academic decision-making and career-planning program that is delivered intrusively and proactively to first-year students may be expected to produce bi-directional benefits for the institution and its students. It should benefit the *institution* by promoting student retention and satisfaction with the college, and it should benefit *students* by increasing the likelihood that they will pursue an academic specialization and career path that is both personally meaningful and self-fulfilling.

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