

Academic Advising and the Student Transition to College: Current Issues, Emerging Challenges, and Potential Roles for First-Year Experience Professionals

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The first year of college continues to be a critical period for student persistence, learning, and development. College students are under increasing pressure to make commitments to major and career plans at a very early stage in their undergraduate experience, often without the programmatic support to do so. First-year experience professionals, who are knowledgeable about student development theory and professionally committed to facilitating the transition of students to college, are well positioned to fill the void in support for early academic and career decision-making. Provision of proactive and personalized support to meet the current demands for early educational and vocational decision-making may be pivotal for ensuring the success of today's first-year students in general, and today's growing number of first-generation students in particular.

Nationally, more than 50% of all students entering higher education leave the campus at which they began their college experience without completing a degree (Tinto, 1993). Across all Carnegie classifications of postsecondary 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; ACT, 2010). Thus, the majority of students who withdraw from college do so during their first year (Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange, 1999), resulting in an overall first-year attrition rate of more than 30% at four-year institutions and more than 40% at two-year institutions (ACT, 2010). The importance of first-year advising for reducing student attrition is underscored by research indicating that student commitment to educational and career goals is one of the strongest factors associated with persistence to degree completion (Willingham, 1985; Tinto, 1993; Wyckoff, 1999). National surveys of entering college students repeatedly show that the most common reasons why new students enroll in college are "preparing for a career" and "getting a better job" (Sax, Bryant, & Gilmartin, 2004). Thus, it is understandable that students who struggle to find or commit to a long-term educational and vocational goal are at greater risk for attrition.

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Decided vs. undecided students: Myths & realities

Although research indicates that there is a strong relationship between student commitment to educational and career goals and persistence to degree completion, it does not necessarily follow that simply requiring first-year students to declare a major will reduce their risk for attrition. It is the personal *commitment* to the goal, not the public *declaration* of a goal, which promotes persistence to degree completion. Supporting this conclusion is extensive research conducted by Lewallen (1993) who collected 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 knowing 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 (higher grade point average) and were more likely to persist to graduation than decided students.

These findings suggest that decided students may be equally at risk for attrition, particularly if their decision is: (a) premature—made without reflective forethought and careful planning; (b) unrealistic—made without accurate self-knowledge (e.g., awareness of personal aptitudes, abilities or talents); or (c) uninformed—based on insufficient knowledge and lack of accurate information about the relationship between academic majors and future careers.

Furthermore, student decisions may be driven entirely by extrinsic factors (e.g., pleasing parents or maximizing future income) rather than by intrinsic motivational interest. Students may be just as vulnerable to impulsive or premature decision-making about their major as they are to procrastinate indefinitely about choosing a major. Farvell and Rigley (1994) contended that “the well-intentioned question, ‘What are you going to major in at college?’ asked frequently enough by family and by advisors can lead students to believe they are somehow deficient because they have not yet chosen an academic major” (p. 37).

Strommer (1997) noted that “being undeclared is generally presumed to be an aberrant condition that needs fixing” (p. 72). This prevalent belief is not well supported by empirical evidence because students may be undecided for a variety of reasons, many of which are psychologically healthy and have nothing to do with absence of direction, lack of goal orientation, or propensity for procrastination. As Gordon pointed 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; thus, 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 reflective thinkers with a deliberate decision-making style who prefer to gather more information before making

a commitment (e.g., gaining first-hand experience with different academic disciplines before committing to one as a major). This is supported by a 25-year longitudinal study conducted at The Ohio State University of 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). Typically, all three of these types of students would be indiscriminately lumped together in the generic category of “undecided,” but almost three-quarters of them were undecided for reasons that demonstrate a healthy decision-making process characterized by personal reflection and temporary suspension of judgment. It would be more accurate to classify these students as “exploratory,” “investigative,” or “deciding” students. As J. R. R. Tolkien stated in the *Lord of the Rings*: “All who wander are not lost.”

On the other hand, prolonged indecision about a major (e.g., well into or beyond the sophomore year) can reflect indecisiveness and fear of commitment to making a decision that has long-term consequences. A study was 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).

The reality is that students’ choice of college majors is marked by much uncertainty and change. It is estimated that over two-thirds of entering students change their major during the first year (Kramer, Higley, & Olsen, 1993) and between 66% and 75% of college graduates end up majoring in a field that was not their original choice (Cuseo, 2005; Willingham, 1985). 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 almost 75% of all students entering college are actually undecided about their academic and career plans, and at least 50% of all students with declared majors are prematurely decided majors who will eventually change their minds.

In his doctoral dissertation, Lewallen (1992) noted 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” (p. 110). Thus, the reality is that the vast majority of college students do not reach a firm and final decision about their major before college matriculation; they make that decision during their college experience.

Applying student development theory to understand students' academic and career decision-making process

One of Chickering's famous "seven vectors" of college student development is "establishing identity" (Chickering, 1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Similarly, in their seminal text on the *Freshman Year Experience*, Upcraft and Gardner (1989) cited "developing identity" as a core component of first-year student success. In its sequel, *Challenging & Supporting the First-Year Student* (Upcraft, Gardner, Barefoot, & Associates, 2005), "exploring identity development" appears again as an essential feature of first-year success.

These views about the development of college student identity resonate with my 30 years of experience as a faculty advisor for both decided and undecided students; if there is anything these experiences have taught me it is that when students engage in the process of choosing a major, they are doing much more than selecting an area of academic specialization; instead, they are grappling with an issue of personal identity. Students often treat their decision about a major as a decision about whom they want to be or want to become. The question, "What should I major in?" raises the two key reflective questions identified by Palmer (2000) in his book, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*: "What am I meant to do? Who am I meant to be?" (p. 2).

Research in the area of college student development strongly suggests that the majority of first-year students need substantial support for making educational and vocational decisions because they are not yet at a stage of intellectual or personal maturation at which they can make these complex decisions without support. Perry (1970, 1998) discovered through in-depth interviews with college students during successive years of the undergraduate experience that first-year students generally are at a "basic duality" stage of cognitive development. At this stage, they tend to view issues and decisions in dualistic terms—right or wrong, yes or no. Typically, they lack appreciation of multiple perspectives and multifaceted thinking. Typically, it is during the sophomore year when students naturally start to engage in and appreciate relativistic thinking (i.e., understanding that multiple factors and perspectives need to be weighed to understand an issue and to make well-reasoned choices and decisions).

Perry's findings are reinforced by the work of Baxter Magolda (1992) who conducted open-ended interviews with students from the first through final year of college. She reported 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.

Supporting the work of Perry and Baxter Magolda is research on the sophomore year experience, which suggests that students begin to think deeply about issues involving educational and vocational identity during the second year of college (Schreiner & Pattengale, 2000). For example, focus group interviews conducted with students at Purdue University revealed that sophomores frequently 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 (Boston & DuVivier, as cited in Evenbeck et al., 2000).

Chickering's developmental theory of college student identity (Chickering, 1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993) also postulated that development of personal identity, long-term educational plans, and career purpose arises after the first year of college. Chickering's theory is supported by the empirical work of Gardner (2000) whose surveys of students at different stages of 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.

Lastly, brain imaging research on the development of the cerebral cortex provides additional evidence pointing to the conclusion that beginning college students need maturational time and support to make long-range decisions because the prefrontal cortex—a “higher order” brain center responsible for long-range planning and decision-making—is not fully mature until, or after, age 20 (Thompson, 1999).

Campus approaches to working with undecided students

National survey research has suggested 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) noted that variations in institutional attitude toward undecided students can have significant impact on their initial decision-making process:

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)

Unfortunately, some postsecondary institutions promote premature or impulsive decision-making by urging or requiring new students to declare a major at college entry. For instance, Gordon (1995) noted, “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” (p. 93). Even institutions that allow entering students to specify “undecided” on their admissions form may still strongly encourage or pressure their students to declare a major early in their 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.

On some campuses, undecided students are left “homeless” because they do not have an academic or organizational unit of the college that they can call their own. As Habley (1994) reported: “Some faculty-only systems virtually ignore the developmental needs of undecided students either by assigning them to 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). This institutional practice may discourage first-year students from admitting they are 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 Frost (1991) noted, “In institutions that urge all freshmen to declare a major, undecided students might be reluctant to identify themselves and remain underserved. If colleges and universities are to encourage students to develop the capacity to judge wisely, then perhaps freshmen should defer selecting a major until later in their college careers” (p. 32).

Campus policies that expect 18-year-old students to have well thought-out plans about their immediate academic specialization and their future vocational identity, and to reach those decisions with minimal or no campus support, may be viewed as both developmentally inappropriate and institutionally irresponsible. Institutional policies that push students toward making early decisions about a college major fail to acknowledge the “inconvenient truth” that a great deal of academic uncertainty exists among the majority of first-year students and the importance of the self-discovery process during students’ first year of college. Tinto (1993) 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” (p. 41). Campus leaders and policy makers should be mindful of the fact that beginning college students need adequate “incubation” time for their major and career plans to crystallize.

First-year experience professionals may need to raise institutional consciousness and become catalysts for policy change on campuses where policies discourage or deny students sufficient time for educational exploration and personal growth. It is both reasonable and ethical for first-year experience professionals to question whether such policies are truly student-centered and intentionally designed with the best interest of students in mind, or if the policies are really institution-centered and in place to meet the needs or convenience of academic departments. This question was raised by Redd (2007) in a posted message to the First-Year Experience Listserv:

Why are we worried about students identifying themselves as undeclared as they enter our door? I know many department chairs and deans cringe at a question like that, but if we are requiring it for purely numbers—that is wrong. I understand the yearly fight to allocate resources, but where does student welfare come into play?

In addition to institutional convenience, four other forces have emerged to exert pressure on students to make early decisions about their college major:

1) State legislatures that are interested in cutting the cost of college education by cutting time to graduation (four years or shorter). Some campuses respond to this political push by pressuring or forcing students to commit to a major almost immediately after entry, or to declare a major prior to matriculation, so they get right “down to business” and do not “waste time.” This is illustrated in an article appearing in the *Los Angeles Times* on a Board of Trustees meeting for the California State University System, which reported that university presidents are considering giving students a “dose of tough love” by asking them to choose majors more quickly—as part of an “ambitious” statewide initiative to raise graduation rates—particularly for students who are from underrepresented and low-income groups. One university president, who presides over one of the state system’s most diverse campuses (populated with a high percentage of underrepresented and low-income students) was quoted as saying that campus administrators have been “enablers,” allowing students to “dawdle” in choosing majors and making progress toward their degrees (Rivera, 2010).

2) Disciplinary (academic program) accrediting agencies that are adding graduation requirements for majors in their fields, particularly pre-professional fields. This practice strongly encourages or requires students to make an early commitment to the major if they hope to finish all of its requirements and still graduate within a reasonable period of time. For two-year college students interested in pursuing a very competitive or over-enrolled (“impacted”) major, this policy essentially forces them to select that major immediately and begin their sequence of pre-major coursework during their first term of college if they are to have any hope of transferring to a four-year campus and graduating within a reasonable period of time.

This development may have especially adverse consequences for low-income and first-generation college students (who are disproportionately represented at public community colleges) because they are more likely to choose to pursue impacted pre-professional majors that lead to well-paying jobs immediately after graduation (Davies & Guppy, 1997; Goyette & Mullen, 2006). Often these majors require a heavy dose of courses in math, science, and technology.

Unfortunately, low-income students often come to college from more poor school districts that may not have had the fiscal resources to provide solid pre-college preparation needed to achieve early success in these highly competitive or restricted fields of study (Williams, Leppel, & Waldauer, 2005). Rendón (1994) points out the danger of early major declaration policies for underrepresented 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 fully understand” (p. 30).

3) Increasing emphasis on advanced placement testing that can result in students entering college with so much general education credit already accumulated that they are ready, and often expected, to begin courses in their college major. Calliotte (2006) articulated the adverse decision-making

consequences of this practice in a message posted to the First-Year Experience Listserv: “We now have pressures on students [from the state] to take as many college level credits as they can while they are in high school so that they come into college as sophomores, thus making their time to decide shorter.”

Institutional policies that “push” students into making early or premature commitments to an academic specialization also fail to acknowledge the reality of academic uncertainty experienced by the majority of first-year students, and the process of self-discovery that is essential to personal development during the formative years of college. A deplorable by-product of this trend toward pushing students to hop on a fast track to their major is to reduce their time to mature developmentally, to discover their educational and vocational identity and to meaningfully explore their options through the college curriculum and cocurriculum.

What can first-year experience professionals do to enhance the quality of advising received by first-year students?

The first year is widely recognized as a transitional stage during which students are most “at risk” for academic problems and attrition; however, it is also the stage of the college experience during which students learn the most and report the greatest gains in personal growth (Flowers, Osterlind, Pascarella, & Pierson, 2001; Doyle, Edison, & Pascarella, 1998; Light, 2001). 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” (Gordon, 1995, p. 99).

Many first-year students do not receive *bona fide* “developmental” and “appreciative” advising because faculty members lack the time, preparation, evaluation, and rewards for doing so. Professional advisors—who do have preparation and interest in providing new students with high quality advising—often are saddled with such outrageously high case loads (advisee/advisor ratios of hundreds or thousands to one) that it becomes virtually impossible to provide personalized academic advising. When these limitations of faculty and professional advising are viewed together with current forces that pressure students to reach quick decisions about their educational and vocational plans, it becomes imperative that first-year students receive proactive and intrusive support to meet the challenge of major and career decision-making.

First-year experience professionals involved in the delivery of early student support programs, such as new student orientation, the first-year experience course, and first-year co-curricular programs, are well positioned to strengthen the quality of advising received by first-year students. In so doing, they can help relieve

some of the pressure on new students to find their academic identity, develop meaningful educational plans, and discover potential vocational paths.

The following strategies are offered to first-year experience professionals as intentional practices for helping new students meet the rising challenge of early academic and career decision-making.

Engage students in the process of introspection and personal reflection about their educational identity and future plans by asking the following questions:

- Would you say that you're decided or undecided about a college major?
- If you're undecided, what information do you think you need to reach a decision?
- If you're decided, would you say your decision is: (a) definite, (b) probable, (c) possible, or (d) likely to change?
- How well do you know the course requirements for your intended major: (a) very well, (b) well, (c) not well, or (d) not at all?

The "decided" or "undecided" dichotomy does not always accurately capture the reality that student decisions about majors often vary along a continuum and reflect degrees or gradations "decidedness." When my first-year students tell me they have decided on a major, I have learned to ask two immediate follow-up questions: (1) How *sure* are you about that choice? and (2) What *led* you to that choice? (i.e., Why did you choose it?)

It has also been my experience that first-year students frequently do not know what specific courses are required for the major they intend to pursue, nor do they always know what academic standards must be met to be accepted for entry into that major, if their intended major happens to be one that is impacted or oversubscribed.

Posing questions like those indicated above at new student orientation or in a first-year seminar is likely to reveal that a substantial number of entering students already have changed their minds about the major they cited on their admission applications. I have had students confide to me that they checked a major on their application for admission only because they did not want to appear directionless (or "clueless") and jeopardize their chances of being admitted.

Recommended practices to help student explore, identify, and clarify their decisions about a college major

Remind students that before they make a firm decision and a final commitment about a major, they still should take the two prior steps of knowing thyself (step 1) and knowing thy options (step 2). Effective decisions about a college major rest on the twin pillars of self-awareness and curricular awareness. Attaining both these forms of awareness precede, and provide the foundation for, prudent selection of a college major.

Advise students that one of the primary purposes of exposing students to the

liberal arts curriculum (general education) is to give them deeper insight into who they are and what they value, while enabling them to gain greater breadth of knowledge and experience with different academic disciplines, one of which may become their college major.

In addition to finding new fields of possible interest as students gain experience with the college curriculum, they are also likely to gain more self knowledge about their academic strengths and weaknesses. This is important knowledge for students to consider when choosing a major because it will empower them to identify an academic field that builds not only on their personal interests, but also on their natural abilities and talents.

Thus, the trip through the general education curriculum is likely to lead students to discover new interests, talents, and choices for majors, some of which may be in fields that they didn't even know existed. Advising students in this fashion not only provides them with some sense of direction about choosing a major; it also reduces the likelihood that they will perceive general education coursework as a set of unnecessary requirements that they need to "get out of the way," but instead as a vehicle for helping them find their true vocation or calling.

Advising new students to take some time before attempting to reach or finalize a decision about a major does not mean that advisors are telling them to indefinitely postpone the process of exploration and planning, or suggesting to students that they should put all thoughts about their major "on the back burner" and out of their mind for a while. Instead, students are being advised to use the first year of college to develop an exploration-and-confirmation plan of attack for reaching a high-quality decision about their major and future career path(s).

For new students who think they have decided on a major, encourage them to take a course or two in the major to "test it out" before they make commitment. Even decided students should be encouraged to suspend final judgment and declaration of their major until they have acquired some educational experiences in their major field. Remind them that their initial choice should be a well-informed choice, i.e., one based on accurate information about what courses the major entails, what career(s) it leads to, and whether the requirements for the major are compatible with their personal abilities, interests, needs, and values.

Refer first-year students who are struggling with academic decision-making issues to advisors who are known to be sensitive to the transitional needs of new students and who have both the interest and the skills to work effectively with exploratory 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. Helping students receive high quality advising early in their college experience is an effective way to implement the principle of front loading and increase the likelihood that new students will persistence to degree completion. A founding father of the student retention movement argued that "the critical time in establishing the kind of one-to-one contacts between students and their teachers and advisors that contribute

to student success and satisfaction occur during the first few weeks of the freshman year” (Noel, 1985, p. 20).

Most importantly, connecting new students with the most effective and committed advisors is likely to result in these students making more thoughtful, more accurate, initial choices about majors and careers. This serves not only to promote student retention; it will also reduce the probability of premature decision-making and later major-changing, which can lengthen students’ time to graduation.

Encourage students to meet regularly with their advisors, particularly at times other than during the mad rush of class scheduling and registration.

Point out to new students that an academic advisor is much more than just a class scheduler, but also a potential mentor, and the best way to take advantage of this mentoring opportunity is to see an advisor at times other than the mad rush of class scheduling and course registration.

Encourage students to work with their advisors to develop a tentative long-range educational plan. This strategy is consistent with the following recommendation made by the National Leadership Council for Liberal Education & America’s Promise (LEAP): “Give students a compass. Each student can construct a plan of study that simultaneously addresses his or her own interests and assures achievement of essential [liberal] learning outcomes” (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2007, p. 29). When students create a long-range plan (tentative though it may be), it can transform their dreams and aspirations into a visual map of their educational future with the potential of conversion into a concrete action plan.

Inform new students that looking ahead and developing a tentative plan for their courses beyond the first term of college will enable them to obtain a panoramic overview of the “big picture.” If they do not take time to obtain this long-range perspective, their academic experience will be chopped into separate short-term, term-by-term, class scheduling sessions, causing students to view it as a series of stagnant still frames or stand-alone snapshots, rather than as a full-length motion picture.

Students who engage in long-range process of course planning often comment that it enabled them to either confirm their initial plan about a major or change that plan while there was still plenty of time to do so. Some students reported that the planning process prompted them to reconsider their original choice of major because its required courses were not compatible with their personal interests, abilities, or values. Other students reported that the long-range course plan boosted their commitment to and motivation for the major they had chosen because they were excited to see the type of courses that lay ahead of them (Cuseo, 2001). These student reactions strongly suggest that all first-year students would benefit from opportunities to engage in long-term course planning, whether they be undecided students or students who think they have already reached a firm decision about a major. As Erickson and Strommer (1991) argued, “We would do well to treat each one of 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" (p. 74).

Encourage students to engage in experiential learning opportunities to help them gain greater awareness of the realities of work in different careers. To implement this recommendation, first-year experience professionals could suggest to new students that they: (a) interview professionals in different career positions, (b) shadow different career professionals during a "typical" workday, and (c) engage in service learning in different community and work settings. As Gardner (2002) argued, "The working relationship among service-learning programs and units responsible for providing career planning needs to be strengthened and made more intentional" (p. 147).

First-year experience professionals could help organize panels of career professionals and introduce them to new students via the co-curriculum (e.g., major and career fairs) or the curriculum (e.g., first-year experience courses). Potential panelists could 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 from different career fields.

Summary and Conclusion

It is evident from the research reviewed in this article that today's college students are in dire need of support for major selection and career decision-making, and this support should be delivered proactively during the first year of college. Given the lack of faculty preparation and reward for academic advising, particularly for advising undecided students, along with the disturbingly high case loads shouldered by professional advisors, first-year experience professionals may need take a more assertive or "intrusive" role in reaching out to support the advising needs of new college students. Such outreach to first-year students could be made through personal contact, new-student orientation, the first-year experience course, or co-curricular experiences offered during the first term or first year of college that are designed to: (a) provide students with the opportunity to reflectively examine their personal interests, talents, needs, and values in relation to academic and decisions; (b) educate students about the relationship between academic majors and careers; and (c) encourage new students to engage in long-term educational planning.

If first-year experience professionals make a significant early contribution to facilitate new students' educational and vocational programs, it will result in reciprocal benefits for both the students and the institution. The institution benefits by improving student satisfaction and retention, and students benefit by increasing the likelihood they will pursue a college major that is compatible with their interests and talents and a career path that is personally meaningful and fulfilling.

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