
Exemplary Practices

In College Student Major Selection

Ohio First Year Summit 2009
University of Cincinnati

Tara Stopfel Warden
Assistant Dean, McMicken College
Director, UC Center for Exploratory Studies

Most Popular Question

“So what’s your major?”

How They Tend to Choose - Initially

- Default to careers already known
- What's hot on TV
- Current highest salary jobs
- Parents' aspirations for student
- Financial/status aspirations
- Subjects they liked in high school
- Assessments (career or academic) with guidance counselor

Common Pitfalls

- Lack of academic awareness
 - Coursework required in major
- Lack of career awareness
 - Options, work settings, demands
- Lack of personal awareness
 - Academic proficiencies or interests
- Inability to integrate information
- Premature decisions (foreclosure)

Major vs. Career Selection

- Not always interchangeable
 - One choice is academic
 - One choice is vocational
- Ideally, the two are compatible and coordinated
- Most 1st/2nd yr. students are focused on the academic decision
- Limited number of majors, hundreds to thousands of career choices

Best Practices

- Comprehensive exploration process
 - more than just classroom activities
(ex. Holland's Party, RIASEC)
- Follow Virginia Gordon's "3-I Model"
 - Inquire, Inform, Integrate
 - Career, academic & self knowledge
- Multiple assessment tools/types
- Integration into curriculum
 - FYE programs
 - Other (co-)curricular experiences

Best Practices

- Professional advisors with integrated career/advising roles and training
- Relationship development model for student/advisor
- Appropriate advisor:student ratio (1:150 is a good target; 200 is high)
- Mandatory advising or intrusive approach
- Connections (referrals) as needed

Best Practices

- Personalized to student's needs
 - information deficits
 - general indecision
 - personal concerns
- “How students go through these developmental phases during their college years is unique to the individual.” (Gordon, 2006)

Best Practice – Penn State

- Penn State University's Division of Undergraduate Studies
 - College for undecided & “total” intake
 - Low advisor ratios (under 200)
 - Intrusive academic review process
 - Extensive online supports and tools for exploration
 - FTCAP Academic Orientation Program
 - Certificate of Educational Engagement
 - Co-curricular, advising, educ. inquiry

Best Practice – NCSU

- North Carolina State University's First Year College
 - Combined undeclared and FYE programs into First Year College
 - 80-100 students per advisor
 - Professional, cross-curricular advisors
 - Integrated advising/teaching in class
 - FYC Village living-learning community and targeted programming

Best Practice

**UC Center for Exploratory
Studies**

Context

University of Cincinnati

- Large, public, urban research university
- Nearly 40,000 students; 30,000+ UG
- 13 colleges; 8 baccalaureate
- Two-tiered admission process with several highly selective programs
- “UC Shuffle” to be eliminated
- Need to better meet needs of undecided

Center for Exploratory Studies

- Established 2003
- Advising center for major selection & “exploratory” (undecided) student academic advising
- Exploratory students
 - Curricular planning
 - Comprehensive major selection assistance
- Declared students
 - Supplemental advising on major selection & transition
- Largest majority of students first assisted (80%) were DECLARED in a major

Exploratory Data

- 1100 exploratory students at UC
- 500 exploratory freshmen
 - 3x more than any freshman major
- About 3600 students served by CES each year
- 20,000 major code changes in a year
(for all 30K+ UC students; includes pre-program changes)

National Recognition

The National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) cited CES as one of three “exemplary practice” programs for undecided students

(Advising Special Populations, 2007)

Theoretical Foundations

- Virginia Gordon's body of published works on undecided students; other advising researchers (Habley, Grites, etc.)
- Student development theory (Chickering, Perry, Maslow, etc.)
- Student engagement & retention theory (Astin, Tinto, Terenzini & Pascarella)
- Career counseling (Krumboltz, Super, Holland, etc.)

CES Model

- Comprehensive, highly personalized advising
 - academic and exploratory
 - student-driven, individualized process
- Comprehensive assessment and evaluation
 - Career & academic interests and proficiencies
 - personality and values
 - personal variables

CES Model

- First year exploration courses
- Learning communities
- Hot topic freshman seminars
- Most important variable in finalizing major choice is coursework (Gordon)

Center for Exploratory Studies

Exploratory Advising
and Major Selection Process

Exploratory Advising Process

- Discuss/Interview
 - Advisor talks with student and discusses students thoughts, concerns, interests
 - Questions about past and current curricular likes, dislikes, successes, challenges, jobs, extracurricular activities, motivations, etc.
 - General “taking stock” of where the student is overall

Exploratory Advising Process

- **Assessment** (as needed)
 - Personal Style Inventory (or MBTI)
 - Personality-based preferences
 - Identification of associated popular occupations from *Do What You Are* (Tieger & Tieger)
 - DISCOVER Inventories
 - Career Interests
 - Abilities
 - Work-related Values
 - Narrowing of Majors
 - Majors & academic programs elimination
 - Maybe minors & certificate list
 - Student academic proficiencies considered

Exploratory Advising Process

- Evaluate
 - Summarize overall assessment results to identify common patterns and clarify information
 - “Test” and validate results against student’s self-knowledge
 - Obtain student feedback
 - Ask questions

Exploratory Advising Process

- Inform
 - Provide details about majors available for consideration
 - Major descriptions
 - Curricula
 - Requirements
 - Related career options
 - Etc.

Exploratory Advising Process

- Investigate
 - Student will:
 - Further review **major information**
 - Formulate additional questions

Exploratory Advising Process

- Narrow
 - Advisor assists student to further narrow major options based upon:
 - Informed interests
 - Eligibility based on admission criteria
 - Degree progress to date
 - Good-fit majors

Exploratory Advising Process

- Identify
 - Best-fit majors are identified considering:
 - Preferences
 - Academic interests
 - Career goals
 - Rate level of interest on a 1-5 scale to streamline options

Exploratory Advising Process

- Experience
 - Hands-on information obtained prior to making final choice via:
 - Related courses (most important!)
 - Faculty discussions
 - *Major Mentoring* program
 - Other experiential learning options
 - Class visitation
 - Internships or externships
 - Volunteer work
 - Part-time job

Exploratory Advising Process

- Decide
 - Student selects major based on a culmination of information and experiences

Exploratory Advising Process

- Change
 - Student completes and submits paperwork for change of major

Exploratory Advising Process

- Connect
 - For further course selection and academic planning to complete degree requirements, student is connected (not referred) to:
 - College-based academic or faculty advisors, as appropriate
 - Other campus resources as needed
 - Appointments scheduled while in advisor's office

Exploratory Advising Process

- Students often complete this process in a non-linear manor
- May stop and start at various points
- May skip some steps
- May “loop” in process as decision-making occurs
- Process is tailored to each student and depends on individual needs and circumstances
- Advisor serves as guide while student negotiates desirable and appropriate exploration steps
- “Receptiveness depends on readiness, which impacts effectiveness”

A Bit About DISCOVER

- Delivered by ACT
- Students often unready to make a firm career choice in 1st or 2nd year of college
- DISCOVER provides a good foundation for career exploration early in academic career
- Also provides continuity for more detailed career planning over time

DISCOVER Assessment

- DISCOVER Components as Utilized in Major Selection
 - Interests Assessment
 - Most important
 - Abilities Assessment
 - Interesting but easily changeable
 - Values Assessment
 - Indicates venues more than occupational choice
 - Inventory Summary
 - Identification of common themes & patterns (vs. specifics) is most useful for major selection
 - Career Research Database
- DISCOVER Assessment

Resources

- Web
 - NACADA Commission on Undecided and Exploratory Students
 - UC Center for Exploratory Studies Website
 - NCSU First Year College Website
 - PSU Division of Undergraduate Studies Website
- Books
 - *Career Advising: An Academic Advisor's Guide* (Gordon, 2006)
 - *Advising Special Student Populations* (Huff & Jordan, 2007)
 - *The Handbook of Career Advising* (Hughey et. al., 2009)
 - *Selecting a College Major: Exploration and Decision Making* (Gordon and Sears, 6th ed., 2010)

Questions?

Tara Stopfel Warden

(513) 556-6537

tara.stopfel@uc.edu

Assistant Dean, McMicken College
Director, UC Center for Exploratory Studies