

Exploratory Students' Experiences With First-Year Academic Advising

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Six sophomore students who had entered a public midwestern university as undeclared participated in the study. The advisors used a modified form of appreciative advising designed to assist first-year exploratory students. The study was conducted using grounded theory techniques, a phenomenological perspective, and semi-structured interviews. At the time of interview some participants had declared majors. Themes that emerged from the data were categorized according to the Schlossberg transition model. The study provides insight into meaning making that can aid the practice of advising this unique population through career-related and decision-making processes.

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Many students arrive on college campuses without knowing their major or career path. These students, referred to as *undecided* (Gordon, 2007a) or *exploratory* (Carduner, Padak, & Reynolds, 2011) bring forth a unique set of characteristics and require special institutional attention as they make one of the most crucial decisions in their college career: their academic major.

Theoretical Framework

Exploratory students' perceptions of their first-year academic advising experiences are documented in this study. Two human development theories, each set in the context of traditional first-year student transitions, guided the research. The theory of self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2001, 2008) explains the way individuals make meaning out of their experiences. Baxter Magolda (2008) defined self-authorship as "the internal capacity to define one's beliefs, identity and social relations" (p. 269). In a longitudinal study, she (2001) highlighted several developmental tasks associated with people in their twenties: exploring values, making sense about information gained previously, determining the direction one will take, and moving along that path. According to Baxter Magolda (2001), three major questions are addressed during the formation of self-authorship: "How do I know?" "Who am

I?" and "How do I want to construct relationships with others?" (p. 15). She identified four phases in the journey toward self-authorship: following formulas, reaching the crossroads, becoming the author of one's life, and demonstrating an internal foundation.

Schlossberg's (2011) transition theory presents change in terms of four *Ss*: situation, self, strategies, and support. Situation factors include key elements such as timing, duration of the transition, and one's experience with similar transitions. *Self* describes the person experiencing the transition, including demographic characteristics such as age, race, or gender, and psychological characteristics, such as optimism or self-efficacy. *Strategies* refers to the ways in which individuals cope with the transition. *Support* refers to the people, organizations, or institutions to which the person turns for help with the transition.

Although these theories do not exclusively apply to college-age development, they appropriately relate to student adjustment to college life, in general, and specifically, the role of advising in that adjustment. Baxter Magolda's (2001, 2008) self-authorship theory, in particular, helps advisors understand students' meaning-making experiences such that they may recognize advisees' developmental levels and the associated context for their perspectives.

Schlossberg's (2011) theory helps advisors understand the impact of the college transition on the student as well as the extent to which the student views advising as a support system. In this study, I used expressions specifically related to adjustment to the environment, including feelings of support, as a filter during the coding process to help identify themes based on students' developmental levels.

Academic advising, an important part of a college student's educational experience (Light, 2001), can significantly affect students' major and career decision making. Gordon (2007a) stated that undecided students may be "unwilling, unable, or unready to make educational and/or vocational decisions" (p. x). As result, undecided students may benefit from additional advising support. The processes undecided students undergo vary and often reflect other transitional issues presented by most college students (Gordon, Habley, & Grites,

2008). Without a cohesive picture of undecided students, additional research is needed to inform best advising practices for this group.

Summary of Methods

This study took place at a large public, high-research activity university (Carnegie Foundation for Higher Education, n.d.) in the rural Midwest. I interviewed six sophomores who had been advised in their first semester with a modified version of the institution's developmental and appreciative first-year advising model, referred to as *exploratory*, in which students receive guidance in program-of-study and career decision making. The university provides first-year academic advising as part of the residential experience, which applies to the overwhelming majority of undergraduates at this institution, including the six participants. The few who commute also receive advising in the halls because academic advisors are also residence hall directors. Through the exploratory model, the advisor and advisee meet twice. They hold an initial introductory session early in the semester to focus on the student's transition, and a few weeks later they reconvene to plan courses. Students complete a goal-setting sheet for the second meeting to help them focus on academic and co-curricular goals.

Participants were undeclared majors and all were advised with the exploratory model of advising during their first year. The six students in this study exhibited demographical and cultural diversity relative to the campus population. Although specific to the university's advising program, the results may inform advisors at any campus serving exploratory first-year students. By examining the strengths and limitations of the adapted model with this subset of a first-year student population, those working with exploratory students will gain a better understanding of its merits based on student perceptions of their own needs.

Grounded theory techniques from a phenomenological perspective were used to gain insight on first-year exploratory students' meaning making of academic advising experiences. Charmaz's (2006) methods of grounded theory research served as the basis of this study and are based on the assumption that each student experiences phenomena in a unique way such that theory can be created from the data that participants share.

I conducted the interviews using a semi-structured interview guide. Often conversation strayed from the guide and discussion naturally

flowed from topic to topic. The organic development of topics led to exploration of areas that seemed most salient, and student perspectives were further uncovered as themes and subthemes.

I initiated the analysis by coding the data and concluded it with the development of theory. I developed a case for each student, along with a memo that helped me engage in the data, develop ideas, and determine themes (as per Charmaz, 2006). Memo writing provided space to make comparisons between the data, codes, categories, and concepts. The memos offered the opportunity to articulate the conjectures made about the comparisons (Charmaz, 2006). Through this process, theory was formed from participant perspective as related to their experiences as exploratory students.

Results

In analyzing perspectives of each case, I found significant themes, each of which provided perspective on students' perceptions of their experiences with advising and overall as exploratory first-year students. Emergent themes were classified into the four main categories originally identified by Schlossberg (2011): situation, self, support, and strategies. Each category features several subthemes that together demonstrate a woven web of common student experiences.

Subthemes under the situation category related to student activities as well as key interpersonal relationships developed prior to college. Self subthemes focused on students' experiences as exploratory first-year advisees and desire to acquire financial security. Strategy subthemes related to advising appointments and significant academic experiences as identified by the students. Support subthemes focused on the relationships built between student and advisor as well as acknowledgments of other support systems the students had developed.

Situation

Students' experiences as exploratory students formed the primary focus of this study. Students described key situations faced in transitioning to college. Their narratives included instances of high school involvement, and some respondents related tales of their childhood. Several made connections of involvement and interests to a potential career. Additionally, most students could quickly identify an area they did not want to pursue, which was usually associated with an academic discipline that was neither an area of

strength nor enjoyment. Most described time spent in athletics, and all continued to demonstrate physical fitness by either participating in club intramural sports or by exercising at the recreation center. Two students have found a connection between their enjoyment in sports and a potential career.

All students discussed the role of family in their decisions to attend the institution. A substantial number of statements indicated that students had at least one, if not multiple, parents or other family members who had attended the same institution. Additionally, some students saw family as large support systems in their major and career decision-making processes, while others felt uncomfortable pressure from family members to make decisions. Ultimately, the influence of parents and other family members proved complex, varying from student to student, and at times having contradictory effects on each.

Self

Cross-case examination revealed similarities in students' feelings about being undecided, an indicator of self in this study. Interviews revealed that students did not seem particularly apprehensive about declaration of a major, either at the time of the study or before it. One student made comments regarding his age (20 years), which he believed marked a time to make decisions, and the pressure he was beginning to feel from his parents. His comments could reflect slight concern, but do not necessarily indicate panic.

Students used common phrases related to ambiguity regarding major and career indecision: "I don't know" or "I have no idea" came up multiple times. Frequently students shook their heads, smiling or laughing nervously when invoking these phrases that illustrate uncertainty. Although no one seemed ashamed to be in an exploratory phase, their verbal and nonverbal responses could be interpreted to mean that they felt somewhat obliged to declare a major.

Students voiced a second notable concern for financial stability and the ways career choice can affect it. Several students compared the earnings associated with professions. In multiple cases, students seemed to make decisions based on their perceptions of the more financially stable or lucrative profession.

One student discussed an interest in education, but was concerned about job stability. She shared her anxiety upon hearing a statistic about teacher layoffs in the local metropolitan area. Another felt

that being a musician as well as enjoying video games would not lead to viable career paths. He may know aspects about the music and video gaming industries that led him to think choosing those fields presents an undesirable gamble. A third student reflected on the competitiveness of the university's nursing program and the possibility that he may not be admitted. He considered the institution's competitive business school a good back-up plan; he seemed most interested in being employed after graduation even in a field not of particular interest to him.

Each of these three students expressed interest in one field, but hesitated toward pursuing it because of perceived financial insecurity. These perceptions could lead the students away from true areas of interest and professional fulfillment and direct them toward financially stable jobs that may leave them experiencing career dissatisfaction.

Strategies

The cross-case analysis revealed additional academic experiences that informed strategies students implemented in their major and career decision-making process. Specifically, students found advising appointments and course work valuable. At the study institution, most students can choose whether to receive academic advising. The study participants elected to seek advising for class selection, and in some cases, for major and career exploration. While the assistance advisors provided the students falls under Schlossberg's (2011) support category, the act of attending advising appointments, as a direct action the student makes, is considered a strategy they utilize to aid their transition and decision-making process.

All student participants attended their advising appointments, but in the interview, the majority indicated few distinctions between their first introductory meetings and the follow-up appointments held several weeks later. The students seemed to appreciate advisors taking interest in their adjustment, although no one expressed language that indicated that they viewed their transition as particularly difficult.

However, two students experienced some transition challenges. One student felt she did not fit within the university's stereotype and did not make friends upon first arriving; her advisor encouraged her to get involved in church and other community activities. The other worried about his indecision and discussed the concern with his advisor, who encouraged him to take the

time he needed to make an informed decision and also suggested he meet with a career counselor.

Overall, students reflected more on the academic advice rather than the transitional support they received. When asked about their experiences with advisors, students consistently discussed academic components of meetings, such as learning general education requirements, reviewing their degree audit reports, or scheduling classes. Students only discussed adjustment conversations when directly asked if they had occurred. This pattern of response may reflect students' expectations from the appointment, the topics they found most helpful, or a combination of anticipated and important issues.

In addition to advising, many participants found course work selection a beneficial strategy for career decision making. Academic advisors recommended some courses but students also chose general education or elective courses on their own. Multiple students indicated taking a career development class for exploratory students and indicated it was enlightening. Additionally, many students took classes, such as chemistry and infectious disease courses, that helped them solidify major and career choices. For example, one selected a pre-med major based on these exploratory classes.

Support

The analysis of advising experiences revealed how students utilized their support systems. All participants met with their advisors during their first semester (Fall 2011). Although they participated in two meetings as outlined in the model, the students could not distinguish between the two meetings; that is, they seemed to blend into one experience. When asked about the appointments, some students with questions recalled returning to their advisor immediately prior to or after registration. They considered this follow-up their second meeting; because they followed the two-meeting model, it was most likely their third meeting.

In general, students spoke positively about their advisors. Comments such as "she was very nice," "he was very helpful," and "I was surprised about how much [the advisor] knew" indicate positive student experiences. One student did not consider his advisor helpful: "He tried to help me fulfill [general education requirements]. I think he was pretty new, so it wasn't very detailed." When asked if his advisor offered any resources or suggestions to help him make major

or career decisions, the student shook his head and said, "Uh, no." The student's nonverbal and verbal responses indicated that he would have appreciated information on such resources.

Advisors helped students in a variety of ways. Participants mentioned that their advisor assisted with selecting classes and understanding the degree audit report as well as discussed general education requirements. Two students said that their advisor encouraged them to meet with career services staff to help narrow down their academic interests. One student found career services particularly helpful and said the career "testing" (assessments) he took were "a giant help." He noted the advisor assured him it was okay that he was still deciding and said "take your time finding out what you want to do."

Students were asked whether advisors talked with them about transitioning to college. When prompted, all students indicated advisors had broached the subject and seemed to appreciate the discussion. Some students talked at length about the transition conversations with their advisor, while others did not go into detail. Students who did not elaborate may view their transition as easy so did not feel the need to discuss the topic in depth: "Yes she (advisor) talked about the transition from high school to college. I didn't have a huge. . . . It wasn't that big a deal for me, so I honestly I don't remember at this point."

Overall, the group expressed a passivity in their approaches to taking advantage of support systems. Although the group as a whole expressed positive transitions, some students seemed to miss out on part of the experience. That is, students' priorities seemed to center around social aspects of getting along with their roommates and making friends, and they did not make the connection between discussing the transition with their advisor and the advisor's ability to assist them in their overall success as a student.

Each student experienced their exploratory status in a unique way. Most demonstrated comfort with deciding at the time of the interview or prior to meeting with advisors. Several students referred to the common major-changing behavior of their peers and seemed to prefer being considered exploratory.

Four of the six participants declared their major by the end of their first semester. Of the two who were still exploring after their second advisor appointment, one did not articulate any concern, while the other felt anxious and experienced pres-

sure from parents. Cole, the student who seemed comfortable with being undecided, frequently used phrases such as “I’m still asking questions.” This advisee also discussed determining “what I like to do and how I could make a career of it.” According to Baxter Magolda’s (2001, 2008) model, Cole was following formulas. Furthermore, external influences led him to believe that playing guitar and video games will not lead to viable career options.

The anxious undeclared student, Chris, had narrowed his career choices to nursing or business, and seemed to be leaning toward nursing, pending acceptance to the university’s competitive program. According to Baxter Magolda (2001, 2008), Chris is at the crossroads, which is often signified by a crisis. Chris experienced a crisis when trying to decide between two professions that required admittance into a competitive academic program.

Multiple students expressed a desire to acquire financial stability through their career. Several students were attracted to the reputation and job placement rates of the business school. Although many of these students referenced other interests, they gave the earning potential associated with a business degree as a prominent reason for considering various majors within business. More than one student referenced education as a potential career but coupled those interests with uneasiness about job placement and salaries. Similarly, several students demonstrate artistic talents, but only one student, Lauren, found a way to use them, and she also expressed uncertainty about the stability of an arts career. As she moved toward Baxter Magolda’s (2001, 2008) self-authorship phase, Lauren identified her interests, values, and talents and subsequently chose to pursue a career in marketing.

Overall, most students gave positive reviews of academic advising. Student expectations for advising seemed focused on academics and scheduling as opposed to discussing transition and goal setting. Students frequently described advisors as “helpful” and indicated that their advisor worked with them to organize a schedule and select classes that would meet general education or other requirements. Although no students expressed concern about discussing their transition with the advisor, the students did not indicate that such conversations were expected or meaningful. After prompting, students recalled discussing transition and goal setting, but not

necessarily at a different time than they addressed scheduling and other academic advising topics.

Despite not seeing the importance of the transition conversation or stating their understanding of the advisor role, students seemed to appreciate the multiple ways the advisor could help them. For example, one student indicated he talked with his advisor about a roommate conflict. Another commented on his advisor’s proximity and accessibility, saying her office was “right there” and that he would see her around his hall and at meetings or events. Therefore, although they did not take advantage of advisor accessibility, the students surveyed recognized it as a resource.

The findings indicate that, unbeknownst to the study participants, students’ needs may not have been fully met. Some students found avenues to explore their major and career interests outside of academic advising. Some identified Career Services as well as the career development and other academic courses as resources for reaching decisions on a major. In particular, those who took the career development or another class may have felt that they gained enough information to make a decision on a major or career and thus did not feel the need for further exploration.

Discussion

This study offers insight into exploratory students’ perceptions of their experiences with first-year advising and the extent to which advising had aided them in major or career development. The study revealed meaning making of academic-advising experiences through a phenomenological perspective; that is, I sought to determine the first-year students’ exploratory experiences. The method chosen proved appropriate: Theory was developed based on the themes that emerged during the research.

Although some students referenced nervousness or frustration with being undecided, others did not express concern; therefore, one can conclude that students were mostly comfortable with their undecided status. All participants exhibited characteristics of Baxter Magolda’s (2001, 2008) first or second phase. No one had reached self-authorship, but some students were beginning to feel discord associated with making major and career decisions as associated with the crossroads stage. All participants used strategies to help them make decisions, such as meeting with their academic advisor or taking a relevant class. However, at times, these students did not make a

determination of a major or career a top priority. Their comments indicated high motivation for making friends and developing social networks, which may point to the influence primarily received from external sources rather than from their internal voice or sense of self.

These findings comport with work by Gordon (2007b), who explained that undecided students typically present with more developmental needs than other students. Super (1957) stressed that undecided students exhibit different levels of understanding about ways interests, skills, and values connect to each other and a career choice. When considering these two statements together, one can appreciate the reason the participants could not effectively articulate their needs.

When considering methods to best serve this population, Gordon (2007b) pointed out that major and career decision making requires completion of several steps over considerable time. Elam, Stratton, and Gibson (2007) discussed the Millennial students' sense of immediacy. For the current college attendee, the lengthy process of major and career decision making may pose particularly frustrating challenges. Students with little experience with decision making, such as those at lower developmental and career decisiveness levels, could experience dissonance with the process itself, especially when unsure of their initial goals.

Implications for Academic Advising

Advisors and other professionals who guide students through critical decisions, such as those regarding major and careers, must understand that the process is shaped by a student's overall developmental capacity. Understanding a student's position within identity developmental frameworks, as well as mechanisms students use to work through their transitions (Schlossberg, 2011), will help advisors determine whether a student is ready to choose an appropriate major and career.

Students who participated in this study found their advisors "friendly" and "helpful," but overall also used other resources in their major-decision process. They may have learned more from actively exploring (e.g., taking career assessments as part of the career development course curriculum) than from discussing interests and options with advisors. Therefore, advisors may want to implement methods of major and career exploration that require specific engagement opportunities. Creating hands-on learning opportunities will encourage the student and advisor relationship in the same

way as more discussion-based applications of advising.

According to Upcraft, Gardner, and Barefoot (2005), "Overwhelming evidence [suggests] that student success is largely determined by student experiences in the first year" (p. 1). The findings of this study illustrated ways exploratory students coped with their transition to college. By framing themes around Schlossberg's four Ss, I was able to examine not only students' ability to navigate their transitions, but also the internal and external systems in place to support them.

In her theory of marginality versus mattering, Schlossberg (1989) wrote about the importance of involvement, integration, and engagement as did Astin (1984), Kuh (2005), Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, 2005), and Tinto (1993), who all linked student connectedness with the institution and persistence. As evident from the cross-case analysis and findings, many themes about social support systems and students' priorities for creating social networks show that participants were looking for the types of support identified as important to retention.

Participants found support systems for declaring a major through conversations with their advisors as well as career development or other courses that helped them narrow interests. Students developed informal support systems by joining student organizations, playing intramural or club sports, and developing friendship networks. Although interventions that focus specifically on career decisions supply important information for student decision making, the results indicate that advisors must also recognize the need to prioritize assistance with creating social connections on campus. By helping students navigate social systems, while not directly addressing issues of major and career choice, advisors may provide an important foundation for future exploration of interests.

Gordon (2007b) suggested that the one-on-one appointment offers the most effective method for delivering academic advising especially for undecided students. The modified advising model provided services to students on an individual basis. Students in this study said that they benefited from the reflection and goal-setting period as they grew comfortable with the process of career and major decision making. Meeting with advisors individually and on two separate occurrences with reflection time in between could have helped to alleviate students' natural sense of urgency in bringing closure to the decision-making process. Providing students time to reflect seemed helpful

for students in this study as expected based on Super's (1957) theory.

Based on the findings of this study and preceding research, students benefit from one-on-one meetings held initially at the beginning of the semester and then again just prior to registration. By using this format, students may intentionally engage in the decision-making process as they must actively use reflection and set goals. Tools such as a goal-setting sheet, which includes a breakdown of objectives, outline of steps to attain the objectives, list of resources and knowledge needed, and a preliminary academic plan, can help the student think through their interests, skills, and values so that they can make connections to career fields.

Students who actively engaged in major and career decision making, through goal setting or career assessments, seemed to benefit more than those who simply met with academic advisors. All the participants who took the career development course found that it moved them closer to a decision. One student did not take the class, but received similar services through meeting with a career counselor. Advisors may want to recommend such courses or resources to their exploratory students. They can advocate on campuses without a career center or course that addresses major and career development to implement these resources. They should encourage that reflection time, through goal setting, assessments, or similar activities, be built into the career development course, and they should implement these initiatives into their own practice.

Consistent with the findings of Elam et al. (2007), parents exerted a large influence on study participants. Advisors and other professionals working with exploratory students must recognize the role the parent plays in the student's life and the ways parents may be influencing the student's decisions. Two students in this study experienced some pressure from parents to declare a major, and most described their parents as supportive. However, some students feel an intense obligation to pursue the career paths of their parents or other family members. As with all generalities, the advisor must recognize exceptions and not apply the same questions with those completely disconnected from their family as with students who depend on family support. In both the case of the independent and dependent student, advisors need to know the involvement of family as students face decision making.

Students discussed additional support systems they had created. Each discussed their involvement on campus, and some articulated the ways that involvement helped their transition to college. Other students could not fully express the importance of institutional involvement to their transition, but knew that the activities provided the social networks that they valued. Some students may not realize that their choices of activities can be key indicators of appropriate career fields. While learning about their students, advisors can help them make this important connection.

This strategy of identifying interests, as supported by Super's (1957) work on development, challenges students whose priorities may be placed on socialization rather than choosing a major. Advisors can only assist a student willing and developmentally ready to undergo the decision-making process. For unready students, advisors can explore the nature of priorities with them, encouraging them to express the reasons they find these qualities important. This exercise allows students to reflect on values and goals, which could better prepare them for the process of major and career exploration.

Implications for Future Research

The study of exploratory students and their perceptions of academic advising has the potential to inform future practice and research. The findings could inform studies on academic advising for declared students, transitional needs of new matriculants, as well the major and career decision-making processes for specific populations.

This research included six students at one university. Future studies with larger and more diverse populations may yield additional themes that will contribute to the understanding of exploratory students' experiences with advising.

Further research could focus on an academic advising model. Although the two-meeting exploratory model satisfied students' perceived needs overall, a different format may address areas that this model did not. Additional examination of this model, along with others, could help strengthen overall advising programs.

Summary

Exploratory students experience undecidedness in unique ways. Some feel pressure to arrive at college with a declared major, and some exploratory students experience high levels of stress while making a decision. The participants in this study seemed comfortable with their exploratory

status, but two articulated some initial internal or external pressure to make a decision.

Although the initial study was designed to examine an advising model, the project evolved to explore the students' decision-making processes. The findings paint a generalized picture of the ways students feel about being exploratory and how the university support system affects major and career decision making. This research may provide some consistency to the current disparate body of knowledge on students, decidedness, and advising.

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