
What Were They Thinking? Decision-Making in the Experiences of College Students At Risk

STEPHEN O. WALLACE
SHIPPENSBURG UNIVERSITY
OF PENNSYLVANIA

The ability to make appropriate decisions is a key to college success. Some college students appear to not make satisfactory academic progress, not because they lack ability or desire, but because they make academic decisions that seem to put them at risk. Assisting students to make appropriate academic decisions is a primary objective for developmental education professionals. This article proposes an ecological framework for investigating decision-making in the experiences of college students at risk. By helping students at risk to better understand the dynamic forces that shape their senses of identity and that affect their decision-making experiences, we can better assist them to make decisions appropriate to achieve their academic and personal goals.

College students are faced with having to make a number of important decisions, and the ability to make appropriate decisions is a key to college success. Some college students appear not to make satisfactory academic progress, not because they lack ability or desire, but because they make academic decisions that seem to put them at risk. Examples are plentiful. One is the student with an ACT math score of 16 who struggles with remedial math courses yet insists on majoring in engineering to get a high paying job. Another example is the developmental student who must juggle full-time home and job responsibilities and enrolls in a semester schedule overloaded with “killer” courses in order to graduate on

time. Students in these cases often face academic difficulties, probation and academic suspension. Assisting students to make appropriate academic decisions is a primary objective for developmental education professionals. This article proposes an ecological framework for investigating decision-making in the experiences of college students at risk. By helping students to understand better the dynamic forces that affect their academic decisions, we can better assist them to achieve their academic and personal goals.

To help students make sense of decisions that place them at academic risk, the temptation to prescribe our own meaning to the student's experiences must be resisted. It is easy to assume that a student's decisions are inappropriate because they produce negative outcomes, but that does not address the crucial issue. Rather than conclude, "That is the most ridiculous decision imaginable!" we need to ask, "What was he or she thinking?" The crucial issue is what the decision means to the student. This question poses a twofold challenge. Students may not always know what drives their decision-making processes, and we cannot presume to know what decisions mean to the students. To empower students at risk to make decisions appropriate for them, we must step beyond analyzing the decisions made or the outcomes and help students investigate what their decisions mean to them.

Schutz (1967) states that this type of investigation is three-sided. One aspect is to examine how college students at risk interpret their experiences of making academic decisions, such as whether to attend college, to major in a certain field, or to take certain courses. Instead of just identifying what decisions students make, what is being asked is for the student to interpret his or her subjective or intended meanings for the decisions. The investigation also probes the student's process of meaning-establishment and asks how the student creates his or her meaning for the decision. Schutz states that the question of meaning can only be adequately addressed from within the context of historical time. The student approaches the process of making academic decisions with a stock of knowledge gained through past experiences, interactions, and a set of

future expectations. To understand what academic decisions mean to students at risk, the formation and structure of those lived experiences and future intentions that give meaning to their decisions must be examined. Schutz also notes that the student's social world is always in the process of formation; therefore, presuppositions through which students interpret their experiences are continuously being created. The third aspect of this investigation involves the observer's process of interpretation. Schutz reminds us that we can observe students at risk, and we can relate their academic decisions to some of our prior experiences. We may share similar experiences, but we cannot presume to share the same meanings of the experiences. The meaning belongs to the actor, not the observer.

For students at risk to understand better the academic decisions they make, they need to identify who or what is the most significant influence on their thinking. Students do not make academic decisions in a vacuum. Instead, their experiences of decision-making are shaped by complex, interrelated interactions involving other persons, environments, resources, goals and past experiences. Therefore, the quest to understand better the decision-making process of students at risk should incorporate concepts gleaned from views of human development and the person-environment interactions that influence decision-making.

ENVIRONMENTAL INFLUENCE CONTEXTS

Ecology theory proposes that all aspects of human development are interconnected, much like the threads of a spider's web; therefore, the focus should be on understanding the whole context rather than attempting to isolate the various aspects. Bronfenbrenner (1989) argues that the developing individual is embedded in a series of progressively more complex and interactive systems. What happens in one setting influences the others. For example, family problems at home can impact a student's academic performance at school, and changes in federal and state policies may greatly impact the opportunity for some students to pursue college degrees.

Environmental influences may include such forces as family, friends and peers, previous school experiences, and even the media. As the generations of college students have changed—from Boomers to Gen-Xers to Millennials – the range of parental influence has shifted. Bandura (1986) emphasized that external forces, such as parental modeling, parental push, or parental encouragement, influence behaviors. Early literature supported the idea that parents exercise the most influence on a student's decisions about college and that first-generation college students from low socio-economic backgrounds might be disadvantaged by not having positive parental modeling (Brittain, 1963; Smith, 1981; Stage & Rushin, 1993; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). However, ten years later Pearson and Dellmann-Jenkins (1997) note that parents were no longer the most significant influence in a student's decisions about college. Today, educational administrators at all grade levels express concern about a modern breed of micromanaging parents – helicopter parents – and the impact they have on students' decision-making and personal development (Strauss, 2006).

The environmental influence on a student's development may extend beyond the immediate family or primary care-giver. Astin (1993) argues that the single most powerful influence on personal development is the peer group. He suggests that students will change their values, behavior, and academic plans based on dominant orientations associated within the peer group. Sokatch (2006) finds that peers are the single best predictor in college-going decisions in his sample of low-income urban minority public high school graduates. A student's educational background is also a possible influence on his or her process of making academic decisions. Wahl and Blackhurst (2000) note that important academic decisions may be made before adolescence. In fact, tentative college plans may be formed in early elementary school (Ring, 1994). The impact of the power of suggestion transmitted through popular television and movies on some students' selections of college majors and impressions of what college would be should also be investigated. Are students' interests in career fields such as criminal in-

investigation and medicine influenced by popular TV shows such as “CSI” and “Grey’s Anatomy”? If so, do students have realistic understandings of the profession or required academic preparations?

The econometric model suggests that students are strongly influenced by their perceptions of the economic benefit promised for their efforts (Bateman & Spruill, 1996). A study by the Educational Testing Service (2000) notes that college campuses will become increasingly diverse in the 21st century and that minority students will account for eighty percent of that growth. The report attributes this projected growth to a belief among many minority families that a college degree is the key to having a prosperous life.

By investigating the environmental influence contexts, we can help students see how they are affected by outside influences, such as family, friends, prior educational experiences, and media. This will assist students to assess whether they have created their own meanings in decision-making or simply adopted meanings handed down by others. The other dimension that contributes to the decision-making process is the interaction of the student’s identity development contexts through which a sense of self is created.

IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT CONTEXTS

The investigation into helping students at risk make sense of their decision-making processes should also seek to identify the contexts that contribute most to their development of a sense of self. Self concept can be understood as “our attempt to explain ourselves to ourselves, to build a scheme that organizes our impressions, feelings, and attitudes about ourselves” (Woolfolk, 2001, p. 71). Human development theory notes that a person’s sense of self is constantly being redefined through complex processes of interactions involving biological, life stages, psychosocial, socio-cultural, socio-historical, and racial/ethnic identity experiences.

Psychosocial theory contributes to an understanding of college students’ experiences by examining the important issues that students face as their lives progress, such as how to define themselves, their relationships with others, and what to do with their lives

(Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). Even though his theory has been contested, Erikson is established as the progenitor of developmental theories. Erikson (1968) and Marcia (1980) assert that the greatest identity development occurs during late adolescence – between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one. According to this theory, most college students are faced with making complex academic and career decisions during a critical developmental stage when they are just beginning to formalize their senses of self. College students are in the process of becoming. Students at risk need to understand how their decision-making is intimately linked to their developing sense of self and the interactions that influence this process.

Chickering (1969) was one of the first researchers to specifically examine the development of college students. He notes that the transition to college is marked by complex challenges in emotional, social, and academic adjustment. He concludes that most college students develop their senses of identity concurrent with their educational attainments. Archer (1982) adds that the development of a sense of self is a process that may linger and progress through the first years of college. A study by Cooper, Healy, and Simpson (1994) documents that students grow and change over time as a result of co-curricular involvement. Based upon such theories, students at risk should understand how their academic decisions are vitally linked to their identity development.

Authors such as Fleming (1981), Ogbu (1991), and Tinto (1993) have documented the impact of racial and ethnic identity on a student's decision-making and college experiences. Fleming (1981) notes that due to issues of racial prejudice, black separatism, and a preoccupation with social problems, black students on predominantly white campuses may spend more of their energies learning interpersonal coping strategies than in pursuits conducive to intellectual growth. Ogbu (1991) theorizes that some minority groups in America may see education as oppressive and that ethnic groups form different theories of making it – their cultural histories lead them to varying formulas for success, some valuing education

more than others. Tinto (1993) adds that students of color at predominantly white institutions often feel they are in a foreign land and may feel isolated, question their academic abilities, experience feelings of inferiority, and question their self-worth. These experiences may result in ambivalent attitudes about education and the belief that the system of oppression in which they live would not allow them to attain the benefits of education even if they did exert themselves. These students may come to the conclusion that if the education path is blocked, then there is no need to follow it. This view can be promulgated as parents pass it along to their children.

The contexts that shape a student's sense of identity and process of meaning-making are complex and include biological, family, social, cultural, historical, economic, and intellectual factors that are influenced by issues of gender, race, and ethnicity. The student's meanings of academic decisions are constructed through dynamic processes in which the individual and the environment continuously interact. The individual both affects and is affected by his or her environment and participates in changing the environment. So, behaviors, such as a student making academic decisions, cannot be interpreted out of context and should be understood in terms of the total setting or context in which behavior is produced.

USEFULNESS OF THE ECOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

More research is needed to identify the forces that influence the decision-making processes of today's students at risk. The primary advantage of investigating the experiences of college students at risk making academic decisions within an ecological and systems approach is that it acknowledges that students do not make decisions in a vacuum. This framework allows us to observe the greater context within which meaning is established and interpreted. By helping students at risk to better understand the dynamic forces that shape their senses of identity and that affect their decision-making experiences, we can better assist them to make decisions appropriate to achieve their academic and personal goals. The end result will not be just higher retention rates, but more fulfilled lives.

Rather than prescribe our own meanings to the decisions made by students, we do need to ask, "What were they thinking?"

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Stephen O. Wallace currently serves as the Coordinator of Developmental Education and Advising Development at Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania. A lifelong learner, he has earned four graduate degrees including Ph.D. in Educational Administration and M.Ed. in Adult and Higher Education. Dr. Wallace has made presentations on serving students at risk at the Council for Opportunity in Education annual convention and the Pennsylvania Association of Developmental Educators annual conference.