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Living in the Explore House: A Major and Career Exploration-Focused Residential Learning Community for Undecided Students

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Abstract

Scholarship on students who enter college without a declared major indicates that this population of students faces unique challenges (Anderson, 1985; Beal & Noel, 1980; Lewallen, 1993), but also may be more likely to persist to graduation and earn higher grades than those who enter college with a declared major (Lewallen, 1995). Based on undecided students' needs for academic, career, and personal resources (Zarvell & Rigby, 1994), this article describes the implementation of a residential learning community (RLC) focused specifically on providing undecided students with in-hall programming and services related to academic major and career exploration, and provides implications for future implementation.

Keywords

undecided students, career exploration, major exploration, residential learning communities

The University of Minnesota-Twin Cities (UMN-TC), a large, public research university located in Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota, admits students directly into discipline-specific colleges (e.g. College of Liberal Arts, College of Education and Human Development). This admission practice may be perceived as encouraging students to declare majors relatively early to begin academic work within a particular discipline and ensure timely graduation (EAB, 2016). However, this practice can also present a number of challenges for students unable to identify their desired major at the point of acceptance into the institution.

Some research has shown that students entering an institution without a declared major experience lower levels of academic success and are less likely to persist to graduation than students who enter with a declared major (Anderson, 1985; Beal & Noel, 1980; Lewallen, 1993). In contrast, however, Lewallen (1995) found that undecided students were actually *more* likely to persist to graduation and to earn higher grades than students who entered college having decided on a major and posited that these results may have been a function of institutional programs and supports geared specifically toward undecided students. Similarly, Legutko (2007) found that programming focused on academic exploration led previously undecided students to make more discerning decisions when declaring majors and to be more likely to persist in a major in alignment with their interests and skills than undecided students who did not partake in such programming. Results from a more recent study by EAB (2016) revealed that students who switched majors in their junior or senior years graduated at nearly the same rate as those who made earlier major declarations. These particular findings suggest that the process of exploring one's potential major in college may, in fact, not prohibit students from graduating in a timely manner and that services intended to support students through this process may contribute to additional positive student outcomes.

Center for Academic Planning and Exploration

Zarvell and Rigby (1994) articulated three categories of resources needed by undecided students: academic, career, and personal. In 2010, in response to the needs of undecided students at UMN-TC, the institution established the Center for Academic Planning and Exploration (CAPE), intended to provide opportunities for students to explore majors and to clarify their vocational interests through academic, career, and personal services and programming.

CAPE is located in a relatively central building on campus and offers a variety of services to students, including: one-on-one academic and career coaching; a one-credit, seven-week course intended to assist students in discerning academic and professional interests; academic and career exploration workshops; drop-in peer coaching hours; and the "Major Network," in which undecided or exploring students can connect with upper-class students within particular majors. While

CAPE serves a significant population of students who visit the CAPE office on campus, CAPE staff sought to explore additional means of reaching students, particularly undecided students living in on-campus residence halls.

Outcomes Associated with Residential Learning Communities

Much scholarship has elucidated the positive effects that engagement with an institution beyond curricular responsibilities can have on student transition to college as well as student persistence (Astin, 1984; Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993). Specifically, engagement in residential learning communities (RLCs), in which students live with others who share a common academic or thematic interest, has been associated with increased levels of student persistence (Jones-White et al., 2010; Shapiro & Levine, 1999), higher levels of academic achievement (Lindblad, 2000; Stassen, 2003; Tinto & Goodsell, 1993), high levels of social and academic integration (Stassen, 2003), and increased levels of interaction with faculty (Garrett & Zabriskie, 2004; Pascarella et al., 1994). In regard to RLCs for undecided students, Gordon and Steele (2015) suggest that “a living-learning experience for undecided students provides an ongoing, coordinated program effort that can meet the developmental needs of students during their first year” (p. 162). Accordingly, CAPE sought a partnership with the office of Housing and Residential Life (HRL) to develop an RLC to support undecided students at UMN-TC.

The Explore House

During the 2018-2019 academic year, CAPE and HRL collaborated to offer an RLC named “The Explore House” for first-year undecided students. Together, CAPE and HRL established goals for the RLC at the outset of the program. Specifically, the program aimed to:

1. Foster a sense of community and togetherness for undecided students who, because of the nature of the institution, can feel isolated from their peers;
2. Provide programming and direct access to tailored resources related to major and career exploration;
3. Increase students’ self-awareness related to their personal interests, strengths, and values, as well as increase students’ confidence in their decision-making skills;
4. Increase students’ knowledge of majors and related careers, as well as their understanding of resources available to assist them in their exploration; and

5. Assist students in identifying a “right fit” major early on in their career at the institution, thereby increasing the potential for retention at the institution and persistence to graduation in a timely manner.

Knowledge of the needs of undecided students at UMN-TC led CAPE and HRL to identify a framework of *community* (facilitating opportunities for students to build community and social support), *self-awareness* (facilitating opportunities for students to engage in vocational discernment related to their skills, values, interests, and strengths), and *exploration* (facilitating opportunities for students to learn about academic paths available to them) (Gordon & Steele, 2015), which informed the development of programming for Explore House residents. Students living in this RLC were encouraged to engage in optional programmatic initiatives designed to facilitate vocational exploration, including:

- Community-building programs intended to facilitate support between residents as they explore majors and careers;
- Opportunity to enroll in the optional, one-credit, seven-week elective course taught by CAPE coaches and designed to help students explore potential majors;
- In-hall access to academic and career coaches from CAPE;
- Access to monthly drop-in peer coaching within the residence hall; and
- Monthly programs (facilitated by CAPE professional staff and peer coaches) designed to increase students’ self-awareness of their own strengths, values, and interests; understanding of academic options at the institution; and knowledge of career opportunities related to specific fields of study.

The Explore House was marketed to all incoming students on the housing application sent to all admitted students. The marketing materials described the RLC as tailored to students who felt uncertain or undecided about their major and had an interest in engaging in the exploration process. Forty-four students lived in the Explore House during the first year of the program. Approximately half of the Explore House residents self-selected to live in the RLC during the housing assignment process the summer prior to their first year, and half were assigned to live in the RLC based on available space. The Explore House was located on one floor of a four-floor building. While not all residents on the floor self-selected to live in the RLC, Explore House programming was offered to all residents on the floor.

The monthly programs offered within the Explore House began with an “Exploring Majors 101” workshop, which took place early in the fall semester and aimed to provide students with a starting point for the process of deciding on a major via dissemination of information about a variety of majors and career paths. Later in the fall semester, Explore House residents attended a panel with upper-

class students who discussed their experiences with deciding on a major and shared advice on that process.

In the spring semester, Explore House residents indicated an interest in career-specific exploration, so staff from the UMN-TC Career Services department and Center for Community-Engaged Learning offered a panel of students to share their experiences with vocational and career exploration. Additionally, CAPE offers a Major/Minor Expo in early spring semester open to all students interested in exploring majors. The event hosts every academic department on campus and provides an opportunity for students to talk with advisors and faculty all in one space. Explore House residents were personally invited to attend the Expo and received vocation-focused questions a week prior to the event to help them get the most out of the event, as well as reflection questions following the event (see Appendix A). Students were not required to attend the event nor to submit their responses to the reflection questions.

Additionally, the Community Advisor (CA) for the Explore House was an upper-class student with interest in supporting students in major and career exploration throughout the semester via structured and informal conversations, programming, and referral to CAPE. The CA received training from CAPE staff about CAPE's services both during their initial fall training and in ongoing installments throughout the academic year. This CA had also utilized CAPE's services themselves previously and was able to share their own perspective with Explore House residents about the utility of CAPE's services and programs.

Program Assessment

CAPE and HRL conducted assessments at various points throughout the year to learn about students' experiences in the Explore House and to determine whether or not students reported movement toward major discernment and declaration. Upon receiving IRB approval, our research team conducted an assessment of the Explore House in order to identify effective elements of the program as well as potential areas for improvement.

During the first week of fall semester, all 43 Explore House residents completed a survey developed by CAPE (see Appendix B), which contained a variety of questions about their level of understanding of resources offered by the institution, their confidence in their ability to make decisions related to their major and career, and their level of anxiety related to declaring a major. The CA administered the survey via paper copy at the first House meeting.

At the end of the first semester, students were invited to one-on-one conversations with their CA as a follow-up to the initial survey. Questions in these conversations related to how students had found the Explore House helpful to them over the course of the term, their status in the process of deciding on a major, and

their level of anxiety related to declaring a major. Twenty-one students participated in these conversations. The CA recorded the responses within each individual conversation, and the research team subsequently coded and analyzed the data within these responses (see “Lessons Learned” below for discussion of findings).

Near the end of the academic year, CAPE and HRL invited students to participate in two different focus groups to discuss their overall experiences in the Explore House. These focus groups allowed for the collection of substantial qualitative data from individual Explore House residents. Students were asked to describe their experience in the Explore House; whether or not living in the Explore House helped them better understand major and career options available to them (and if so, how); whether or not they felt closer to declaring a major than they did at the start of the year (and if so, what contributed to movement toward declaration); and whether or not living in the Explore House affected their level of decidedness about a major or possible career (and if so, which specific programs or elements of the Explore House experience affected them). These focus groups were recorded and transcribed. Two members of the research team conducted independent analyses of the data, then identified shared codes, and finally identified themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018), discussed in the sections below.

Lessons Learned from Assessment: What Worked

Student responses within each assessment method suggested that numerous elements of the Explore House effectively assisted students with their major and career exploration.

Diminished Anxiety

When asked about their level of anxiety (1 = low; 10 = high) related to declaring a major, Explore House residents reported decreased levels of anxiety from the beginning of the fall semester to the end of the fall semester. On the initial survey, respondents indicated relatively high anxiety related to declaring a major, with 42.9% of responses ranging from 6 to 10. At the end of the fall semester, this number dropped to 19%, with the remaining 81% of respondents indicating lower anxiety levels between 1 and 5. Responses to the end-of-semester survey offered some explanation for this decrease; in particular, respondents indicated that gaining knowledge of the CAPE resources available as well as the ability to connect with other undecided students led to increased confidence about the process of declaring a major. This decrease in self-reported levels of anxiety lends support to an argument for the effectiveness of an RLC focused on major and career exploration for undecided students in reducing anxiety related to declaring a major.

Effective Programmatic Elements

The mid-year conversations and the end-of-year focus groups revealed which programmatic pieces of the Explore House residents found most helpful. Students appreciated the ease with which they could attend CAPE-sponsored events in their hall, as well as the explicit availability of resources related to various majors and related careers. Residents also valued the encouragement provided by the CA and CAPE to explore majors/careers and to discern which majors/careers best aligned with their interests, values, and skills.

Explore House residents appreciated the student panels and found particular value in hearing from upper-class students who had successfully switched majors. Additionally, the students found value in a program in which participants were invited to “match a major” with a particular career. This program provided the job titles held by panelists and asked the students to guess each panelist’s major. In discussing this event, students expressed feeling pressure to decide on a major that will “take [them] directly to a career.” In recalling panelists’ advice from this event, one student reflected, “their major always had, like, nothing to do with what they were doing, but that was actually, like, really reassuring for me. I was like...I can study what I want, and I’ll find something to do.” The “match a major” program dispelled myths about career paths for the students and opened up the option for them to think more vocationally about pursuing their interests.

Students also liked the opportunity to have informal conversations with the CA and peer coaches about their major and career exploration. As one student stated,

I always imagined going to a CAPE advisor as like, you kind of need to know what you want to talk about before you go . . . that’s kind of how I felt about appointments in general, where with [the CA] it was like, I had no idea what I was going to say when I came up to her . . . during the one-on-ones, she would bring up things like majors and it was just easy to get her perspective as a student, not even a person who has the same [potential] major as me, but just to talk through it.

The ability to connect with more experienced peers appeared quite important to the Explore House residents, some of whom felt somewhat intimidated at the prospect of meeting with professional CAPE coaches.

Overall, the data gained from students in this process suggested that students experienced diminished perceived anxiety about declaring a major, which they attributed to their experiences within the Explore House. Additionally, students placed great value on their ability to access CAPE resources within the hall and particularly appreciated being able to connect with the CA about the process of exploration. The program assessment also revealed several suggestions for how to implement future iterations of this RLC.

Implications for Future Implementation

The feedback gained from students in this first implementation of the Explore House, along with scholarship on the needs and desires of the current generation of students can inform future implementation of RLCs focused on major and career exploration.

Flexibility and Accountability

Students indicated that while they appreciated receiving information about CAPE's services, some of them had a hard time prioritizing a visit to the CAPE office to follow-up with a coach outside of the coaches' time in the hall. Students expressed a desire for more access to CAPE services outside of "typical" office hours, given that students' schedules are often full with classes, work, and other commitments during those hours. As Zhao and Kuh (2004) argue, RLCs are designed to blur the distinction between curricular and co-curricular spaces. Accordingly, an RLC with this focus provides a clear opportunity for peer and professional coaches to meet with students where they live and outside of regular office hours.

Explore House residents indicated that they did not explicitly understand the benefits of CAPE's services. Assigning students to an exploration coach or requiring them to sign up for a coaching meeting may provide accountability and increased clarity for students. Allowing students to take a career interest or skill assessment at an in-hall event and discuss results with a coach then and there creates an opportunity for students to enhance individual self-awareness of personal interests, strengths, and values and to explore their academic interests and strengths, while also establishing a relationship with a coach. This practice would allow students access to a professional at the institution with whom they can build trust, which may increase student engagement and retention (Tinto, 1987). Coaches can work with students to schedule a follow-up appointment during this first point of contact in the Explore House. The established relationship within the RLC may decrease students' feelings of intimidation related to seeking professional services outside of the Explore House.

While the Explore House offered optional drop-in hours with CAPE professional and peer coaches to increase the ease with which students could connect with coaches, this method may not have been as effective as the Explore House team had hoped. As one focus group participant explained,

It's definitely nice when you're required to do stuff, for me anyway, because otherwise I'll be like, "Oh, yeah, that sounds fun; I'll go do that." But then it's like, I get to the time, and I'm like, "I've got a lot of homework to do. I'm

tired. Maybe I'll just make it to the next one." And then you think the same thing about the next one.

For students today, more informal and recurring drop-in hours often become something they postpone in favor of academic deadlines and other obligations, whereas a requirement to set up an appointment for peer or professional coaching (e.g. as a component of a first-year seminar course) has the feeling of a formal commitment students may be more likely to honor.

Mentoring, Marketing, and DIY Majors

Given that students indicated appreciation for the opportunity to have relatively informal, low-pressure conversations with the CA and peer mentors, as well as the information learned from student panels, RLCs of this nature would be wise to focus on the role of peer-to-peer connections in major and career exploration. Today's students value the opportunity to connect with and receive guidance from other students in the form of formal and informal mentoring. This promising practice may also lead to increased persistence (Colvin & Ashman, 2010) and higher academic achievement for students (Collier et al., 2008; Rodger & Tremblay, 2003).

Students suggested the use of humor and memes in marketing of events and services in order to get students' attention and capitalize on their interest in social media. The current generation of students respond to more edgy and visual marketing (Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Upfront, 2015). Given the popularity of BuzzFeed "quizzes" (Haynam, 2015) and other similar platforms, CAPE and RLCs of this nature should consider referring to interest inventories as BuzzFeed-type quizzes or marketing the inventories to students directly on social media.

Through Explore House programming, students learned of the wide variety of majors available at the institution. Students in the RLC expressed particular interest in the option to design their own major, which aligns with research indicating that a significant percentage of Generation Z students have a desire to design their own degree (Northeastern University, 2014; Seemiller & Grace, 2016). As one student stated,

I wanted to at least start in architecture but after that first semester I wasn't really sure about it. I knew the social sciences were really important to me, especially demography. There wasn't a major for that, so finding a major like global studies where I can just focus in on demography . . . I don't think I would have ever gotten to that conclusion of what I wanted to study if not for having been in the Explore House.

Higher education will need to attend to this trend among today's students and consider offering increasingly customizable majors. Within an RLC focused on major and career exploration, programmatic offerings can highlight course options

within these customizable degrees, as well as potential career paths related to these majors.

Information → Experimentation → Decidedness

Ultimately, the information on major and career exploration that students received via programming within the Explore House led undecided students to “experiment” with courses within particular disciplines. This experimentation typically led to one of two results: either a) students felt the course material aligned with their interests, which led them closer to deciding on that particular major, or b), the course material did not align with students’ interests, which led them to further explore different courses and disciplines. As one focus group participant shared, “I started out the year thinking I was going to major in computer science, and now I want to go into earth science with a focus in hydrology because I kind of figured out the earth science thing.” Another stated, “The Explore House got me all the information and then, I think, me letting that information sink in and experiencing it, taking those classes, that’s kind of what helped me with the decidedness.” For most residents, these acts of experimentation resulted in movement toward decidedness on a major that fit with their interests, values, and skills.

In sum, access to information about CAPE’s resources, particularly information about the academic majors and career paths available to students, benefited Explore House residents. Specifically, Explore House programming contributed to students making discerning decisions about particular courses and, in some cases, actually declaring a major. Students provided helpful suggestions for how to market CAPE’s services and programs both within the Explore House and across campus more broadly.

The Future of the Explore House

CAPE and HRL have identified some immediate changes for the future of the Explore House based on the assessment discussed above. Given that the students found clear value in learning from the CA in the hall, future Explore House CAs will receive increased training on CAPE’s services and resources, as well as tools for guiding students in major and career exploration. For example, the CA will receive explicit training in the practice of peer coaching, intended to assist them with facilitating exploratory conversations with Explore House residents.

Conclusion

Overall, it appears that first implementation of this major and career exploration-focused RLC was effective for residents who took advantage of the

programming offered by CAPE and HRL staff. Students reported decreased anxiety about declaring a major, expressed appreciation for access to CAPE's services, and reported feeling less intimidated by the process of exploring majors than when they had arrived on campus. Application of suggestions for future implementation will likely lead to increased student engagement with CAPE's services by Explore House students, as well as other measures of efficacy for this RLC and others aiming to assist undecided students as they explore potential majors and careers.

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Appendix A

Major/Minor Expo Questions Provided to Explore House Residents

Major/Minor Expo Event Questions

Pre-Event Checklist:

Examine the list of majors attending the Major/Minor Expo. Write down five majors you want to talk to during the event:

How would you rank them on a scale of 1 to 5? What interests you about these majors? Is there anything that concerns you about these majors when thinking about studying them?

During Event:

Helpful questions to ask majors: *What are the requirements of this major? What are the career opportunities for this major? What academic strengths are important for this major (i.e. good at math, strong science skills, etc)?*

Majors I visited at Major/Minor Expo:

Helpful questions to reflect on when thinking about majors....

Why do I want this major? Do I know enough about this major? What are the requirements for this major? Do I know anyone I could talk to who is studying this major to get their insights?

Post Event:

Reflect on your conversations with each of the majors you visited. *What did you like about each major? What didn't you like about each major? Spend 5-10 minutes writing down your initial thoughts and reactions to the event and majors with whom you spoke.*

Next Steps:

When thinking about decided on a major, here are some questions to think about and next steps to help you come to the decision of what you'd like your major to be:

In what ways have you grown intellectually over the last four months? What are your academic strengths? Which classes have you found most interesting and why? Which classes have been most challenging and how did you handle those challenges? Have you talked to your advisor or made an appointment with a CAPE advisor to discuss majors and questions you have?

Appendix B

Pre-Assessment Survey sent to Explore House Residents

This brief survey is designed to help us understand where you are at in the decision-making process for choosing a major. It shouldn't take more than 5 minutes to complete and your feedback is important to helping us best serve you!

Please circle one of the following with strongly disagree, disagree, agree or strongly agree:

I have an understanding of my interests, strengths, and/or values:

Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

I have an understanding of the majors available at the U of M:

Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

I have an understanding of careers related to majors available at the U of M:

Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

I am confident in my ability to make decisions around majors and careers:

Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

Which statement(s) best describe you? (Check all that apply):

- I have no idea what I want to major in
- I want to major in so many things; I am not sure how I will ever make up my mind
- I have thought about what I would like to major in, but the University has many majors that I do not know much about. I want to explore a bit before I decide
- I am seriously considering a few different majors, including: _____

Please indicate your areas of interest (Check all that apply):

- Arts & Performing Arts
- Biological Sciences
- Business
- Communications
- Cultural Studies
- Design
- Education
- Engineering
- Environmental Sciences
- Health Sciences

- Humanities
- Human Services
- Mathematics
- Physical Sciences
- Social Sciences
- I am not sure what I am interested in
- Other: _____

On a scale of 1 to 10 (with ten being the highest), how anxious are you about being undecided on a major?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

What made you interested in joining the Explore House Living Learning Community?