

Undeclared Students' Patterns of Declaration: Practical and Political Implications for Orientation and Transition Programs

Diane L. Donnelly and Kenneth W. Borland, Jr.

Many colleges and universities do not require freshmen applicants to declare a major prior to their first semester or even until several semesters of attempted coursework are completed. Additionally, undeclared freshmen may now be one of the largest and fastest growing portions of incoming classes. The decision of what to major in does not come easily for most students, and at some point in a student's career, most students experience some level of doubt or indecision about their college or vocational goals (Gordon, 1995). The observed trends suggest that there may be a higher than previously observed level of un-decidedness contributing to the status of entering undeclared, a status which may be more widely accepted than in the past.

Theories of student development propose that being undecided about a major or career path is a normal developmental stage (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Erikson, 1968; Evans, Forney & Guido-DiBrito, 1998; Perry 1968; 1999) and researchers confirm that a large number of college students are indeed unsure. The Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California at Los Angeles has collected national data showing that between Fall 1995 and Fall 1999, 7.7% of all freshmen entering higher education formally stated they were undecided about even their probable major field of study (Astin, Parrott, Korn & Sax, 1997; Sax, Astin, Korn & Mahoney, 1998). The most evident group of undecided students is the entering freshmen of traditional age, who, for a number of reasons, enter college without declaring a specific major (Gordon, 1995). Titley and Titley (1980) related that 75% of college freshmen demonstrated "...some form of undecidedness, tentativeness, or uncertainty about choice of major" (p. 293). Foote (1980) postulated the percentage of freshmen who were undecided might be as high as 90%. While the first year of college has received a great deal of attention in the literature, few studies follow undecided students beyond the freshman year (Anderson, Creamer & Cross, 1989).

The growth of undeclared freshmen is either good or bad news, depending on a position in the debate focused on whether it is advantageous for freshmen to declare majors prior to the first semester (immediate identification via affiliation within an academic home) or more advantageous for freshmen to enter as undeclared (identification development via curricular exploration).

The theory, research, and best practices focused on the debate may offer some

Diane L. Donnelly, M.Ed., is Freshman Seminar Coordinator and Academic Advisor in the General Studies Program at Montana State University-Bozeman. **Kenneth W. Borland, Jr.**, D.Ed., is Associate Provost at East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania.

intellectual resolve, but it is almost certain that orientation and transition personnel will continue to serve a generation of incoming freshmen who prefer to enter undeclared. These students will have a special orientation and transitional challenge, as described in the literature. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) substantiated the premise that the field of study selected by students has a considerable effect on how they experience college, as well as their future occupational course. Deciding upon the right major is a priority for college students, and causes them considerable anxiety (Bogenschutz, 1994; Boyer, 1987; Gordon, 1995; Gordon & Habley, 2000; Levine, 1978; Orazem, 2000; Rysiew, Shore & Leeb, 1999). Erickson (1968) wrote "in general it is the inability to settle on an occupational identity which most disturbs young people" (p. 132). For traditional-aged freshmen, this is probably one of the most substantive decisions they face. During the selection of a major, and subsequent reflection upon the appropriateness of that decision, students may encounter their first experience with the connections between their educational, career, and life goals (Laff, 1994).

Therefore, the purpose for conducting this study was to identify and present patterns of student declarations at one university in the American northwest where one-third of incoming freshmen are undeclared, and to suggest implications for orientation and transition programs that serve undeclared freshmen.

Methodology

The research on undecided students has focused on who they are, as well as why they are undecided, why they change majors, and why selection of a major is important to them. However, this research was focused on some aspects of undecided students that had not been addressed as thoroughly; namely, the questions of what majors these students select, when they select them, and their rates of persistence in that major. Also, given that there is little information on undecided students after their first year, patterns of major declaration over a two-year period were examined.

The initial population for the study was all traditional aged freshmen who had participated in a summer orientation and completed the General Studies Freshman Seminar course in the Fall of 1998 from the General Studies Program which also advises these students. A second criterion for inclusion in the study population was participation in a voluntary, in-class survey, 'Purposes for Education' given in both the first and final weeks of the semester. A total of 449 students were included in the study population.

Fall 1998 through Spring 2000 transcripts for the study population provided: (a) enrollment Spring Semester 2000, or last semester of attendance; (b) the college and major declaration of the initial, specified major, and the semester of that declaration; (c) credits completed at the time of major declaration, exit from the university, or if remaining in General Studies Spring 2000; (d) subsequent major declarations, including semester and number of credits completed.

From the Purposes for Education surveys (Borland, Orazem, & Donnelly, 2001), information was gathered from the query: "Two majors I am now considering are...." These data were reflections of similarities between the declared majors and majors the students were considering in their first semester (first and last weeks), as well as if

students were more likely to remain in General Studies (undeclared) or exit the University if they were considering unavailable majors.

Findings

In this portion of the article, the authors report findings rather than offer an interpretation of them which would be idiosyncratic and therefore apply only to the case institution. The value in presenting these findings as the authors have done is in the illustration of the types of information gathered. The Implications section of this article is an attempt to demonstrate how such information can be utilized by orientation and transition program personnel.

Where

Within the period of time spanned by the research, 248 students from the study population (N = 449) had declared majors in the university's seven colleges. The distribution of those declarations were: Education, Health and Human Development, 60 declarations (24%); Letters and Science, 49 declarations (20%); Arts and Architecture, 47 declarations (19%); Business, 34 declarations (14%); Engineering, 25 declarations (10%); Agriculture, 19 declarations (7.5%); and Nursing, 14 declarations (5.5%).

The Colleges most affected by the declarations were Education, Health and Human Development and Arts and Architecture. Education, Health and Human Development realized an enrollment increase of 46% in just two semesters due to the Fall 1998 undeclared freshmen. In particular, the Department of Education received 44 students who declared a major leading to teacher certification. Also, the College of Arts and Architecture increased by an additional 14% quite quickly: 31 declarations were made in the students' first or second semesters. There were other departments and majors that were greatly impacted; however, the above examples illustrate the large impact on those units' planning for course availability, faculty and staff workloads, advising, budget, etc.

When

Most students, 63.5% (157 of 248), declared a major in either their second or third semester and 93.5% (232 of 248) declared with less than 46 credits. The majority of these undeclared freshmen declared majors while officially freshmen or first-semester sophomores and well before the deadline established by university policy: 60 credits. Of those who declared, only 9% (22 of 248) declared a major subsequent to their first declaration during the period of the study.

Further, it was noted that students who declared certain majors often did so earlier than the balance of the undeclared cohort. This was particularly so for majors that required long curricular sequences of prerequisites and for those that are more rigid in their course offerings (fewer electives, math intensive, etc.).

Retention

The retention rate for the study population over the four-semester period was 63% (281 of 449). Students who declared a specified major were less likely to leave. Of the 168 students who left during the study, 80% (134) had not declared a specified major. But the majority of students who exited, 68% (114 of 168), left after either their first or second semester, while only 42.5% (105 of 248) of students who declared a major did so their first or second semester. The one year retention rate for the study population was 74.4% (334 of 449), while the institution-wide rate was 70.2% and this finding is similar to 1994-95 and 1997-98 comparisons (Orazem, 1999).

Prediction

The information gathered from the surveys regarding the majors these undeclared students stated they were considering had a strong predictive value: 69% (171 of 248) of the students who declared, selected a major that was similar to at least one major they said they were considering during their first semester. The 18% (12 of 66) of those still undeclared in Spring 2000 had listed a major that was an unavailable (at the university) on the surveys, and 16% (22 of 168) of the students who exited had stated an unavailable major as *any one* of their majors under consideration.

General Statements About Students

The analysis of the entire data set (Donnelly, 2001) suggested the undeclared freshmen at this institution had diverse academic interests, as exhibited by their major declarations in curricula across the campus. The early declaration of a major was important to them since over 90% did so while officially freshmen or first semester sophomores. They persisted at rates slightly better than the University population as a whole. (74.4% vs. 70.2%). Also, a majority of these students (69%), during the first semester, had an accurate idea of what area of study they would in fact declare. Finally, these institution specific findings support the literature regarding undeclared/undecided students.

- They are not very different from decided students (Foote, 1980; Lewallen, 1994; Titley & Titley, 1980; 1985).
- They persist at rates similar to decided students (Anderson, et al, 1989; Astin, 1993; Bean, 1990).
- Finding a major is important to them (Gordon, 1995; Orazem, 2000; Sagaria, et al, 1980).
- What they think they will major in has predictive value for what they choose (Davis, 1965; Holland & Gottfredson, 1975; Kramer, et al, 1994; Slaney, 1980).
- Students who are initially undeclared persist in their first specified major at higher rates than students who enter in a declared status (Kramer, et al, 1994).

Implications for Orientation and Transition Programs

Readers who wish to generalize from the complete data set may contact the authors to establish for themselves how similar this institution, its students, and its orientation and transition program are to other institutions. The authors' intention of the current study was to highlight practical and political implications for orientation and transition personnel, primarily at the case study institution. The implications from the current research present simple recommendations: know your undeclared students, meet your neighbors, and advise your students.

Know Your Undeclared Students

Orientation and transition program personnel must know their undeclared students. To accomplish this, they must track as well as collect and analyze data on their undeclared student cohort patterns and performance. What, when, and how often do they declare? How accurate are their first inclinations to declare particular majors? In terms of retention, do they stay within the institution at rates comparable to students who enter with majors already declared?

Practically, this information permits program personnel to better describe the collective of students they assist to make successful transitions into the institution. Also it is useful for re-shaping existing or creating new orientation and transition programs to better meet undeclared freshmen needs. Politically, these data assist orientation and transition leadership personnel to intelligently estimate and seek adequate resources, policies, etc. to best serve these students.

Meet Your Neighbors

Equally, it is important to share the pattern and performance data regarding undeclared student cohorts with academic units on campus. These are the colleges, departments, programs that will eventually receive and seek to serve these students. This information is vitally important for their planning success and may be helpful as they recruit students to their majors. If a program collects information that tends to be predictive of what major a student is considering, give the aggregate of these data to deans, chairs, etc. so they can anticipate and recruit how many students will declare in their majors. If data suggest when students will declare particular majors, this can also suggest when the typical student will declare and join that academic unit, thus impacting course demand and advising.

This information is very practical for planning within those units, but it is also a politically advantageous service that the orientation and transition program can provide. Taking time to meet with leaders from other units and to speak with them about the students who will be applying for internal transfer to their programs provides an opportunity to showcase concern about the quality of future students, to listen to concerns about the quality of undeclared students, and discuss how to collaborate in order to improve those students' potential for success in programs prior to a declaration

of a major.

Further, it is politically advantageous to make presentations of the information on a campus-wide level. As more students enter undeclared, information about them and campus-wide dialogue about them becomes more important. Also, it is important to explain to the campus community the quality of these students, their aspirations, what they experience outside of an academic home in terms of barriers and opportunities, and how everyone can be intelligently involved in assisting with their successful orientations and transitions to campus and majors, etc. Politically, this may strengthen an orientation and transition program's position within the community and elevate the perception of undeclared students.

Advise Students

The shape, form, function, and implementation of advising is important to undeclared freshmen, specifically to assist them with transitions into specific majors. Connections to faculty and other students, involvement in the campus, and finding the right "fit" in a major have all been documented as important factors for persistence, particularly during the first year (Astin, 1993; Barefoot, et al., 1998; Gordon & Habley, 2000; Orazem, 2000; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993; 1998; Upcraft, et al., 1989). In the above case, the orientation and transition program for undeclared freshmen combined a strong, individualized professional advising and peer mentoring component with a freshman seminar, and there was a relatively high rate of success in facilitating students' movements from an undeclared to declared major status. The success of the advising component, in conjunction with the Freshman Seminar course curriculum and format, served to connect students with their peers and university personnel, with campus and community resources, and help students work toward finding that "right fit" in a major.

Practically, it is important to discover the early intentions of the undeclared freshman. Begin informing them of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats associated with their aspiration to particular majors. Connect them with faculty and students from those majors. Offer them major/career exploration to assist them in considering their own potential relative to the program and options. Politically, this can lead to more students and faculty who are satisfied with students' choices of majors.

Conclusion

A large number of colleges and universities do not require freshmen applicants to declare a major prior to their first semester, or even until several semesters of attempted credits are completed. Additionally, "undeclared" freshmen may now be one of the largest and fastest growing portions of incoming classes. This may be due to a higher level of "undecidedness" which contributes to the status of students entering "undeclared." The purpose of this article was to, as an illustration, present patterns of student declarations at one university in the American northwest where one-third of incoming freshmen are undeclared, and to suggest practical and political implications for orientation and transition programs that serve undeclared freshmen.

For orientation and transition program personnel, it is very important to know the undeclared students and be able to describe the cohort with data, and to share the pattern and performance data regarding undeclared student cohorts with other academic units on campus. Further, it is very important to shape the advising of undeclared freshmen to specifically assist them with transitions into specific majors.

References

- Anderson, B. C., Creamer, D. G., & Cross, L. H. (1989). Undecided, multiple change, and decided students. How different are they? *NACADA Journal*, 9 (1), 46-50.
- Astin, A. W. (1993). *What matters in college? Four critical years revisited*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Astin, A. W., Parrott, S. A., Korn, W. S., & Sax, L. J. (1997). *The American freshman. Thirty year trends, 1966-1996*. Higher Education Research Institute, University of California, Los Angeles.
- Barefoot, B., Warnock, C., Dickinson, M., Richardson, S., Roberts, M., Editors (1998). *Exploring the evidence: Reporting outcomes of first-year seminars, volume II*. (The Freshman year Experience Monograph No. 25). Columbia: University of South Carolina, National Resource Center for the Freshman Year Experience.
- Bean, J. P. (1990). Why students leave: Insights from research. In D. Hossler, J. P. Bean, & Associates (Eds.), *The strategic management of college enrollments*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Bogenschutz, M. (1994). Career advising for the undecided student. In Gordon, V. N., (Ed.). *Issues in advising the undecided college student*. (The Freshman Year Experience Monograph No. 15). Columbia: University of South Carolina, National Resource Center for the Freshman Year Experience.
- Borland, K., Orazem, V., & Donnelly, D. (2001). Student integration into the academic and intellectual community. 20th Annual Conference on the First-Year Experience, Houston, TX.
- Boyer, E. L. (1987). *College: The undergraduate experience in America*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Chickering, A. W. & Reisser, L. (1993). *Education and identity*. (2nd ed.). San Francisco, Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Davis, J. A. (1965). *Undergraduate career decisions*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company.
- Donnelly, D. L. (2001). *Patterns of undeclared students' major declarations*. Unpublished master's thesis, Montana State University-Bozeman.
- Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity: Youth and crisis*. New York: Norton.
- Evans, N. J., Forney, D. S., & Guido-DiBrito, F. (1998). *Student development in college: Theory, research and practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Foote, B. (1980). Determined- and undetermined-major students: How different are they? *Journal of College Student Personnel*, vol 21, no 1, 29-34.
- Gordon, V. N. (1995) *The undecided college student: An academic and career advising*

- challenge. (2nd ed.) Springfield, Illinois: Charles C. Thomas.
- Gordon, V. N. & Habley, W. R. (Eds.). (2000). *Academic advising: A comprehensive handbook*. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Holland, J. L. & Gottfredson, G. D. (1975). Predictive value and psychological meaning of vocational aspirations. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 6, 349-363.
- Kramer, G. L., Higley, H. B., & Olsen, D. (1994). Changes in academic major among undergraduate students. *College and University*, LXIX (2), 88-96.
- Laff, N. S. (1994). Developmental advising for undecided students: Rethinking the relationships. In Gordon, V. N. (Ed.). *Issues in advising the undecided college student*. (The Freshman Year Experience Monograph No. 15). Columbia: University of South Carolina, National Resource Center for the Freshman Year Experience.
- Lewallen, W. C. (1994). A profile of undecided college students. In Gordon, V. N. (Ed.). *Issues in advising the undecided college student*. (The Freshman Year Experience Monograph No. 15). Columbia: University of South Carolina, National Resource Center for the Freshman Year Experience.
- Levine, A. (1978). *Handbook on undergraduate curriculum*. San Francisco, Washington & London, Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Orazem, V. N. (1999). Fall to fall retention (traditional, full-time freshmen): Montana State, general studies freshman seminar, general studies (no seminar). General Studies Program, Montana State University. Unpublished data.
- Orazem, V. N. (2000). *Understanding why they stay and why they leave: A grounded theory investigation of undecided students at a rural land grant institution*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Wyoming.
- Pascarella, E. T. & Terenzini, P. T. (1991). *How college affects students. Findings and insights from twenty years of research*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Perry, W. G., Jr. (1968). *Forms of ethical and intellectual development in the college years. A scheme*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Perry, W. G., Jr. (1999). *Forms of ethical and intellectual development in the college years. A scheme*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Rysiew, K. J., Shore, B. M., & Leeb, R. T. (1999). Multipotentiality, giftedness, and career choice: A review. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 77, 423-430.
- Sagaria, M. A. D., Higginson, L. C., & White, E. R. (1980). Perceived needs of entering freshmen: The primacy of academic issues. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 21, 243-247.
- Sax, L.J., Astin, A. W., Korn, W. S., & Mahoney, K. M. (1998). *The American freshman. National norms for fall 1998*. Higher Education Research Institute, University of California, Los Angeles.
- Slaney, R. B. (1980). Expressed vocational choice and vocational indecision. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 27, 122-129.
- Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition*. (2nd ed.) Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Tinto, V. (1998). Colleges as communities: Taking research on student persistence seriously. *The Review of Higher Education*, 21, 167-177.
- Titley, R. W. & Titley, B. S. (1980). Initial choice of college major: Are only the

“undecided” undecided? *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 21, 293-298.

Titley, R. W. & Titley, B. S. (1985). Initial choice of college major and attrition: The “decided” and “undecided” after 6 years. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 26, 465-466.

Upcraft, M. L., Gardner, J. N. & Associates. (1989). *The freshman year experience*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.