

Advising Major-Changers: Students in Transition

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Students who change majors do so because of changing interests or because they are forced to face "institutional realities." Major-changers often drift without recognition or advising. Many students are able to make an otherwise difficult transition into another academic area if they are given special curricular and career advising. An innovative program for helping these students identify, explore, and decide on alternative educational and career directions is described.

Students who change their academic majors after entering college do so for a variety of reasons (Elliott, 1984; Gordon & Polson, 1985; Holland & Nichols, 1964; Pierson, 1962; Theophilides, Terenzini, & Lorang, 1984; Titley & Titley, 1980). Some students' initial choices are unrealistic, as they are often based on lack of knowledge about academic requirements or major and job relationships (Pierson, 1962). Students in increasing numbers are being denied admission to oversubscribed majors in such fields as business and engineering. Other barriers to completing certain major choices include poor high school preparation or poor academic performance in certain college subjects required for the major (e.g., math and science).

Osipow (1983) suggested that many changes in educational plans reflect achievement problems rather than a deliberate change of interests. Some students, however, change majors even though they are academically capable of pursuing them (Gordon, Newton, & Kramer, 1985). Although the number of students affected by the oversubscription of certain majors and the other reasons cited above has grown, very few institutions have initiated special counseling programs for these students (Gordon & Polson, 1985).

Realization of the need or desire to change majors occurs at different times in a student's experience. Theophilides et al. (1984) classified major-changers into three categories: (a) early changers (those who changed in their freshman but not sophomore year), (b) late changers (those who changed their sophomore but not freshman year), and (c) constant changers (those who reported change in both their freshman and sophomore years).

Early changers, according to Theophilides et al. (1984), reported a high precollege likelihood

of changing major fields, performed well during the freshman year, and continued to develop academically and intellectually during the sophomore year. The constant changers showed a relatively weak academic performance and low levels of institutional and goal commitment during the freshman year. The late changers reported no intention of changing majors upon entering college but performed poorly during the sophomore year. Theophilides et al. (1984) concluded that an unstimulating freshman year may encourage a reconsideration of choices. The freshman year may be a testing ground for discovering academic abilities and adjusting to institutional reality.

In the early 1980s many institutions in the United States began to experience crowded enrollments in some of their academic programs. These oversubscribed majors (e.g., business, computer science, communications, education, journalism) led to an increasingly large group of students who were experiencing a difficult transition from one major to another. Although there have been studies concerning the number, persistence, and vocational development of major-changers (Althen & Stott, 1983; Barak & Rabbi, 1982; Chase & Keene, 1981; Elliott & Elliott, 1985; Salomone, 1982; Titley, Titley, & Wolff, 1976; Warren, 1961), no specific advising or counseling program targeted only to this special population has been described.

At Ohio State university—especially in University College—over a thousand students were affected by selective and oversubscribed majors in an academic year. Not only was the demand on the time of the existing advising staff unmanageable, but many staff members also did not have the expertise to work with such a diverse and complicated group. The pressures of advising this group became so intense by the middle 1980s that a new advising service was formed. This article will describe the Academic Alternatives Advising Program that was created to identify and counsel these special students.

Academic Alternatives Advising Program

A separate advising office was established within University College at Ohio State University to provide more personal and intensive ad-

vising to students with advanced credit hours who were in the process of changing academic and vocational directions. Early warning systems had been established in many selective and over-subscribed majors so that students who were not making academic progress could be identified (e.g., prebusiness students who were unable to perform adequately in core courses or pre-architecture students who were not admitted to the major). Before the Alternatives program existed, many of these students selected other majors without much thought or drifted without help.

Once the program was established, the following categories of students were reassigned from the regular advising program to the Alternatives area:

- students with 60 or more earned credit hours (quarter) who were not making progress toward a degree in their present major (This judgment was made jointly by the student's initial advisor and the Alternatives advisor.)
- students who had been denied admission to a selective program
- students who had been unsuccessful in completing prerequisites for a specific major program
- students with junior standing who were still undecided about a major
- students with advanced credit hours who needed help in exploring several major programs.

After students were identified for the Alternatives area, they were assigned to an Alternatives advisor, and their advising records sent to that office. Students were sent a letter informing them of their new assignment and outlining its advantages.

The following goals were set for the program:

- to provide intrusive academic and career advising to students with advanced credit hours who were in transition from one major to another
- to provide a personal, caring environment for these students so that they sensed support during a transition many felt was confusing and difficult
- to help these students choose a realistic, attainable major and to demonstrate stability in that choice over time
- to provide services that were designed specifically to help these students so their individual needs were recognized and met
- to increase the retention and graduation

rate of these students who, according to past research, were prone to drop out.

It was established initially that, if the program were successful, some practical outcomes would be accomplished. If proper advising services were provided (a) students would enter degree units with realistic, attainable major choices, (b) students' majors would be stable over time, and (c) students would earn degrees in their alternative choices.

Because these students require intensive, short-term advising, a staff of professional advisors was selected and trained to work with this group. These advisors were experienced generalists—that is, they were trained to be conversant with all the academic programs of the university, particularly majors that had open access and could offer features similar to those that were oversubscribed or selective. Advisors also had strong backgrounds in student development and career counseling theory and practice. Because they were working with an extremely complex group, they were given a title and compensation beyond the regular advising level. The advisor-to-student ratio was approximately 1:150. (The standard advising ratio in the College was 1:375.)

Initially, students were assigned to the Alternatives program for selective admissions areas such as education and the health professions or from oversubscribed majors such as business and engineering. As other majors became oversubscribed (e.g., journalism and architecture), they were added to the monitored areas. Table I profiles the students in the program over a four-year period.

Currently when students are assigned to the Alternatives program, they are excluded by the computerized registration system and advised to contact their advisor immediately. This assures that students are working directly with their Alternatives advisor at this critical juncture.

Program Components

A thorough search of the literature on major-changers and a review of past experience were undertaken before initiating the program. Based on this knowledge, the following staff and program considerations were identified as critical.

Timing

Timing is important if it is to have an impact on students in transition. Special advising ser-

TABLE 1
Profile of "Academic Alternatives" Students

| Year | Students Entering Program | Students Exiting Program | Avg. Entry GPA | Avg. Exit GPA | Average Entry Cr. Hrs. | Average Exit Cr. Hrs. |
|-------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1987 | 267 | 122 | 2.09 | 2.28 | 75 | 93 |
| 1988 | 318 | 210 | 2.22 | 2.26 | 83 | 107 |
| 1989 | 448 | 259 | 2.17 | 2.27 | 82 | 103 |
| 1990 | 501 | 400 | 2.21 | 2.25 | 89 | 109 |
| Summary | 1534 | 991 | 2.17 | 2.26 | 83 | 104 |

CPA = Grade point average
Credit hours are for quarters.

vices may be offered too early for students who are not ready to acknowledge that their initial choice was unrealistic or has become unattainable. Students who feel pressured to make changes in a hurry may not want to spend the quality time necessary to examine alternatives in an orderly way. Others may drift too long and become depressed or discouraged because of lack of direction. Some of these students drop out of school. Optimal timing differs. Help must be available *when* students decide they need it.

Intensity of Need

Students are often emotionally involved in the prospect of changing majors. They may feel they are letting someone down or shattering a lifelong dream. The intensity of this emotional reaction needs to be acknowledged and dealt with immediately. Academic progress is often impeded by unrecognized or unresolved emotional barriers.

Advisor Accessibility

Advisor accessibility is related to timing because advisors need to be available when students need help. Waiting two weeks for an appointment can be unbearable for students who feel pressured to deal with their situations immediately.

Advisor Attitudes

Advisors working with students in transition need to possess a positive attitude about the change process. Advisors who view changing majors as a natural, developmental phenomenon will convey feelings of acceptance and support.

Advisor Expertise

Not all advisors have the knowledge, skill, or patience to work with students in transition. Advisors must be academic generalists and have some knowledge of career relationships because exploration and decision-making involve gathering and interpreting both educational and occupational information.

Program components were designed to meet the needs of these students. A three-pronged approach was initiated: (a) intensive, sensitive individual advising, (b) group advising, and (c) an Academic Alternatives course that students who needed more in-depth, long-term assistance could take for credit.

Individual Advising

Each student was assigned to an Alternatives advisor who worked with the student intensively. The initial appointment was devoted to understanding each student's history and assessing the current situation. At that point a contract was signed by student and advisor and suggestions were made for participating in other Alternatives activities and services. The Alternatives advisement process involved as many appointments as were deemed necessary by student and advisor and included the following steps.

Assessment

The student's academic situation and plans for the year were reviewed and his or her academic strengths and limitations realistically appraised.

Identifying Academic Alternatives

Information about academic requirements, major entrance requirements, and possible career relationships was provided. This information was carefully evaluated in relation to the student's interests, aptitudes, needs, and values.

Decision-making

As students began to explore alternatives, the advisor provided support, helping the student integrate self, major, and career information so a decision could be made. Realistic and attainable goals were identified.

Implementation

When an alternative choice was made, the advisor assisted the student in taking appropriate action to implement it.

Many program materials have been developed, including lists of majors organized by interest areas and abilities, transcript analysis worksheets, and goal-setting activities. Through transcript analysis students are taught to look for areas of success, items indicating limitations, and other patterns that help them view their total academic picture as opposed to the fragmented impressions many students with advanced credit hours often have.

Group Advising

Many types of group activities and workshops have been developed to meet the varied needs of students in the process of exploring new directions.

Academic Exploration Workshops

These small group sessions are designed to introduce students to specific alternatives that relate closely to the specific academic area they cannot enter. For example, each year when pre-architecture students are notified that they do not meet the criteria for admission to the School of Architecture, their names are given to the Alternatives Coordinator, who invites them to an exploration workshop. During this session students are introduced to the Alternatives program and given a list of majors involving similar course work, interests, and values. After the group presentation, students are assigned an Alternatives advisor. Personal follow-up sessions build on the general information provided in the exploration workshop.

Academic Information Sessions

Each quarter, sessions describing individual major areas are available to students seeking information about specific alternatives. These information sessions, which average an hour in length, are provided by faculty, departmental advisors, and other campus experts. For example, a student who wishes to explore psychology, aviation, and elementary education may do so in a detailed but convenient way by attending an hour session on each.

Career Exploration Workshops

Students may explore occupational alternatives in a small-group setting. Instruments such as Holland's Self-Directed Search and Harrington-O'Shea's Career Decision-Making System are used to assess students' interests, abilities, values, and skills. The resulting information is discussed in the context of career goal-setting. Specific Ohio State majors are related to the occupational areas that students identify, and detailed information is given about these majors.

Academic Alternatives Course

A course for academic credit was developed when the need for a more in-depth, concentrated approach became apparent. Unlike traditional career-planning courses offered on many other campuses, this course emphasizes the educational decision-making process. Students receive three hours of elective credit, with a grade of Satisfactory or Unsatisfactory.

A workbook was written to present a systematic approach to making educational and career decisions (Gordon & Sears, 1989). Six units incorporate a "stocktaking" phase and self-assessment activities, which lead to an examination of possible majors and related occupations. During the course students gradually make a commitment to an academic direction through values clarification, an analytical review of the information they have collected, and creation of an academic graduation plan. The final unit helps them implement their decision by formulating an action plan.

Alternatives advisors are instructors for the course. Because the course is not advertised, most non-Alternatives students in it have enrolled because of recommendations from other students or an advisor. Many of these non-Alternatives students are then assigned to the

program, so that Alternatives advisors can continue to work with them after the course has ended. Student demand for the course is so great that many more sections could be taught each quarter if instructors were available. Students have evaluated the course as outstanding.

The Alternatives Advising Program office contains other resources to which students are referred. A small but adequate career library is available. Because two excellent career libraries exist elsewhere on campus, only materials especially appropriate for Alternatives advising are kept in the resource area. Included among the printed resources, for example, are materials providing descriptions of academic majors and how they relate to many of the well-known occupational classification systems such as the Worker Trait Group and Holland systems and the ACT Job Families. Such standard resources as the *Dictionary of Occupational Titles* and the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* are included. Videotapes describing various majors and careers are also available.

The resource center also contains the computerized career information systems DISCOVER and SIGI-PLUS. Students are required to attend a briefing before using the systems. An individual or group follow-up session is provided. These two systems have proven extremely useful in helping students identify alternative majors and careers and in helping them confirm an alternative direction they are seriously considering.

Evaluation Procedures

An extensive evaluation program has been established to monitor students' progress and determine the effectiveness of individual program components. A data base has been set up to collect information about students in the program. As students enter, their former academic major and advisor are recorded, as are entering grade point average, credit hours, and other relevant data. When students transfer to a degree program, their exiting grade point average, credit hours, and new majors are added. Each student is periodically checked to determine stability of major over time and graduation data. Using this detailed data base, a snapshot may be taken of Alternatives students at any time. Longitudinal information is compiled annually.

It is important to note that some students assigned to the Alternatives program were able to enter their initial major choice even though they

had been denied access previously. Although some of these students were not doing well academically upon entry into the Alternatives area, they were able to improve enough to fulfill the criteria for their original choice. Others had earned junior hours but needed additional time to accomplish their goal. Many of these students had changed their major late in the sophomore or early in the junior year. Thirteen percent of the students assigned to the Alternatives program were dismissed. Unfortunately some students were not caught in the early warning net and were referred after they were in serious academic difficulty. The percentage of dismissals, however, is lower than that for non-Alternatives students.

Our latest tracking study showed that of the 210 students who entered the Alternatives program in Autumn 1988, 55% had graduated and an additional 15% were still enrolled as of Spring 1991. Of these, 93% were in the major they had selected while in the Alternatives program. Because two of our primary objectives were to help students to select a stable major and to graduate, these results are gratifying.

Evaluations of other program components, such as the workshops and the course, are solicited from participants upon completion. Students are asked to evaluate their advisors once a year or when they exit the program. Student evaluations have been extremely positive.

Establishing an Advising Program for Major-Changers

Although the program described here was created on a large campus within a university college setting, its goals, objectives, organization, and program components may be adapted at any size or type of institution where there is a commitment to serve major-changers in the most effective way. Keep the following points in mind.

1. Identify or confirm the need for special advising. Initial collection of data should determine the number and type of students, patterns of change, attrition, and other relevant data. A study of current services and their effectiveness with this population also needs to be undertaken.

2. Gather administrative and other campus support. After need has been determined, discuss the necessity of a special advising service with administrators and other personnel currently working with major-changers. Program

objectives and goals, advising services, and other program components to alleviate the situation need to be designed. Because financial support is usually difficult to obtain, a case needs to be made for reorganizing existing staff and services or coordinating existing services.

3. Establish the program. Specific program components, services, and evaluation procedures need to be implemented. These might include individual advising protocols, group counseling, workshops, library resources, computer resources, and the generation of special materials. Staff need to be selected and trained.

4. Establish evaluation and follow-up procedures. Decide what information to collect and how and when to collect it. The program's long-term effects need to be tracked.

Summary

Students in transition from one major to another are often ignored. Although some major-changers make the transition in an orderly way, many others who cannot access oversubscribed majors, who do not perform adequately in their chosen area, who are rejected from selective programs, or who have advanced hours and are still uncertain about a direction need special advising approaches.

Theophilides et al. (1984) noted that many influences causing change of major are not institutionally controlled. They are the result of student "interaction with institutional reality and the consequences of this interaction with one's self-image" (p. 277). Colleges and universities need to determine who the major-changers are on their campuses and what special advising needs are called for. As "early" changers have time to adjust their academic plans, students with advanced hours who are drifting without assistance may be in greatest need. Many are forced to change direction because of "institutional realities" and are not aware of alternatives open to them.

Overall, the Alternatives Advising Program has fulfilled its mission of providing assistance to students with advanced hours who need special, concentrated advising. The number of students who took part in the Alternatives program who graduated or are successfully progressing through an alternative major proves the value of an intrusive approach for students often forgotten or neglected and prone to attrition.

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