

Working With Undecided Students: A Hands-on Strategy

Howard K. Schein, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

Ned Scott Laff, Weber State University

Based on a concept described by the authors as "The Myth of the Academic Major," a scheme for working with students who are undecided about their choice of major or career was developed. This scheme is a hands-on, time-limited method for using students' self-descriptions, rather than the institution's structure (e.g., lists of curricula), as the starting point for dialogue that points students in academic directions.

Working with undecided students is a major issue facing many academic advisors (see Bertram, 1996; Gordon, 1994, 1995; Laff, 1994). Advisors and undecided students usually meet in one or two 15-minute sessions per semester. Continuity of the advisor-advisee relationship is usually fleeting, and dependence on students' doing homework (e.g., interest inventories, etc.) in preparation for an advising session is illusory. Our scheme is not a panacea for all students, but we have had enough success with many undecided students that we have faith in the advising process developed from the conceptual model.

In our conceptual model, "The Myth of the Academic Major" (Laff, 1996; Laff, Schein, & Allen, 1987; Schein, Laff, & Allen, 1987), we argue that the construct of a major is a somewhat artificial notion. We argue that the concept of major is not necessarily a useful starting point from which productive inquiry can spring when working with undecided students. The myth we address contends that majors, in many cases, are bureaucratic and administrative structures that put arbitrary boundaries on disciplines and restrict creative ways of conceptualizing academic pathways. In the same ways that these boundaries are frequently transgressed by faculty members for intellectual reasons, students should also be encouraged to disregard these disciplinary boundaries when thinking about how to construct useful academic programs for themselves. Although students will, eventually, be forced to select a formal major, the process by which they arrive at this ultimate selection is more educationally sound when the formal boundaries are disregarded during the initial stages of decision making.

We propose a model, based on The Myth of the

Academic Major, that students can use to develop a research model for conceptualizing the use of their colleges or universities. This research model is meant to parallel the model that faculty members use to pursue their academic inquiries and to provide a whole-institution approach to framing an educational plan. A political science professor, for instance, whose interests are in the area of international relations probably has intellectual interests that fall outside the course catalog description of the political science department. This person may, for instance, have skills in foreign languages (course catalog: language disciplines), knowledge of other countries (course catalog: geography, anthropology, etc.), knowledge of economic systems (course catalog: economics), and quantitative research skills (course catalog: statistics). In many cases, as well, departmental faculty members approach their disciplines by using skills, frequently developed as undergraduates, in areas separate from their professional department. These skills are tools that these professors frequently use in their research. Many biological scientists, for instance, have significant levels of undergraduate training (i.e., skill development) in areas such as biochemistry, mathematics/statistics, and physics; and many economists have strong quantitative skills.

A corollary to this faculty approach is to put students in the center of their academic planning processes. The traditional approach to major choosing is to have the planning center around the institution. When the institution's palate of choices is at the center, what we call the *program availability* choice model, the student is asked to fit into a preconceived structure. A list of possibilities is presented to the student, and the student is asked to choose a major from this list. This preconceived structure is driven by underlying assumptions that are not necessarily shared with or made clear to the deciding student (e.g., What coherent forces hold this list of courses, the major, together in a meaningful way?). The student is asked to choose within this scheme (e.g., a major) without having much knowledge of what the intellectual contract actually entails and without necessarily exploring how the major could be made more personally relevant. Advisors and course cata-

Figure 1 A 4-Year Planning Form for Undecided Students

	Fall Semester	Spring Semester
FR	Freshman Writing (4 hrs) (gen. ed.) Introduction to Psychology (3 hrs) (gen. ed.) Biology 1 (4 hrs) (gen. ed.) Beginning Ceramics (3 hrs) (elective) Human Sexuality (2 hrs) (elective) semester hrs = 15 cumulative hrs = 15 gen. ed. courses = 3 cumulative gen. ed. courses = 3	Introduction to Fiction (3 hrs) (gen. ed.) Introduction to Ethics (3 hrs) (gen. ed.) Principles of Effective Speaking (3 hrs) (elective) Physical Education Activity (1 hr) (elective) semester hours = 15 cumulative hours = 30 gen. ed. courses = 3 cumulative gen. ed. courses = 6
SO	Child Psychology (3 hrs) (gen. ed.) Calculus 1 (3 hrs) (gen. ed.) Cities in Crisis (3 hrs) (elective) Intermediate Ceramics (3 hrs) (elective) Children's Literature (3 hrs) (elective) semester hrs = 15 cumulative hrs = 45 gen. ed. courses = 2 cumulative gen. ed. = 8	<i>General education</i> <i>Major</i> <i>Major</i> <i>Minor</i> <i>Minor</i>
JR	<i>General Education</i> <i>Major</i> <i>Major</i> <i>Major</i> <i>Minor</i> <i>Elective</i>	<i>General education</i> <i>Major</i> <i>Major</i> <i>Minor</i> <i>Elective</i>
SR	<i>General Education</i> <i>Major</i> <i>Major</i> <i>Minor</i> <i>Elective</i>	<i>Major</i> <i>Major</i> <i>Major</i> <i>Minor</i> <i>Minor</i>

Notes. Completed and current courses are in regular type. Proposed, future courses are in italics.

logs very infrequently explain to students the intellectual basis of a major/discipline and the rationale for why a particular set of courses become the definition of a major. In addition, choosing a major in this traditional way limits students to choosing the academic component of their college careers without integrating the noncredit, cocurricular component (e.g., extracurricular activities, internships,

volunteer work, etc.) into a more complete package. What students do out of class and not-for-credit can frequently have great relevance to their degree programs. These out-of-class experiences are infrequently part of the process of choosing a major.

The *student centered* choice model operates differently. No choices of program availability are given in the initial stages of counseling. Student pro-

Figure 2 An Exercise for the Undecided

An Exercise for the Undecided

Having a Major Fit You—Not You Fitting a Major

The strategy behind this exercise is, first, to find what you want from college; second, to figure out how to get what you want from college; and third, to find the major that best suits you. You do not fit yourself into a major; you find the major that best fits you.

The strategy is based on the field of study concept. You create an area that suits your intellectual, personal, and career goals, and then you find the course and noncourse experiences that help you achieve this objective.

Part 1—Personal Profile

A. *List things about yourself that provide a personal profile* (e.g., What are you good at? What do you enjoy doing? What are your strengths? What are your weaknesses? How do you like to spend your time? How do your friends describe you? Do you like to work alone or in groups? How important is financial gain to you as a life-long ambition?).

B. What do you want to know more about? Do not answer this with words that are names of majors. For example:

Don't say, "psychology." Answer in terms of concepts. For instance: "I am interested in counseling people who are in trouble," or "I am interested in how people make decisions," or "I am interested in how the mind works."

Don't say, "political science." Answer in terms of concepts, for instance: "preparing myself for a career as a lawyer with the intent of . . ." (not "pre-law"); "how politics, culture, and economics affect how countries interact . . ." (not "international relations"); "how the legal system deals with children . . ." (not "social work").

If you cannot complete this yet, try to list concepts that interest you. List ideas that you would like to learn about.

C. *What skills do you want to develop?* For example, public speaking, writing, computing competency, math/statistics, interpersonal?

Part 2—Advisor's Input

A. How can the student get what he or she wants from college?
List the courses, independent study opportunities, and noncredit experiences that address the student's personal profile.

B. Finding a major.
List the fields of concentration/majors that most readily incorporate the course list of Part 2, A. Figure out how to arrange the noncredit experiences (e.g., extracurricular activities, volunteer opportunities, internships, jobs) that address important aspects of the student's personal profile not addressed by credit courses.

files are the data from which choices are derived. In the traditional implementation of this model, students take a battery of tests, such as the Strong Interest Test and they used computerized career information systems such as SIGI-PLUS (1980) or Discover (1982). See Gordon (1995) for more discussion of these strategies. These counselors help students figure out what career to pursue and consequently, what major to declare toward this career.

Even when this process works, it is time consuming,

and frequently, students do not pursue in a timely manner the many steps necessary to achieve resolution. Further, in most college systems this process involves the collaborative efforts of career guidance specialists and advisors—a process that is usually not seamless.

For the advisor who wishes a pragmatic approach to working with undecided students, we offer a model that appears to work best with students who have the most choice in their academic program pos-

sibilities (e.g., liberal arts students), but it can be used as an entree to working with students for whom professional degrees are appropriate. This system is not comprehensive or thorough, but it serves the function of getting a productive dialogue underway.

Let us look at an advising session with a first semester liberal arts sophomore in a university system that has the following requirements:

1. 120 semester hours to graduate;
2. 12 general education courses (3 or 4 credit hours each);
3. about 14 courses in an average liberal arts major and 7 in the minor.

First, advisors and students complete a semester-by-semester course schedule. (See Figure 1.)

After filling out this form through the student's present academic/course work standing, the remainder of the student's schedule is filled out to defer the student's anxiety about degree completion. We fill in the blanks in a somewhat arbitrary manner. It is arbitrary because the placement of the proposed courses is only to allocate semester-by-semester time slots; the courses in italics can readily be shuffled as needs arise. It is also arbitrary in that, after determining a major, some completed courses may fulfill major/minor requirements, thus making other courses optional. This scheme may have to take into account extra semesters of school or summer school.

After the schedule is completed, the process becomes student centered. The following three-step process requires students to play an active role in Step 1 and an interactive role with the advisor in Steps 2 and 3. (See Figure 2.)

Step 1—Personal Profile. The intent of this step is to construct a base from which advisors can talk with students about the students' self-assessments. This step replaces the battery of tests and explorations that career counselors frequently perform. This step can be accomplished relatively quickly and puts the main responsibility on the students' shoulders. We frequently ask students to perform Step 1 over a several-day period with the student, prior to leaving the first advising session, making a return appointment to discuss this profile.

The downside of this strategy is that this profile is not exhaustive or scientific. Students may not return. The upside is that this step is relatively easy and painless to complete by any student; students can accomplish this task alone and without professional help; no testers or appointments to access resources, such as computer-based career software, are necessary; and those who do return are serious about pursuing this venture. This scheme can help students move into professional or preprofessional

areas, but we have also found it helpful in showing incipient liberal arts majors the value of following their hearts as well as their pocketbooks. This scheme helps students who are not self-directed toward professional preparation programs, but who are still concerned about entering the job market with a liberal arts degree, develop educational plans that fit who they proclaim they are. Taking oneself into the job market with skills and knowledge that are consistent with whom one really is will, we hope, result in longer-lasting job satisfaction.

When students present the results of Step 1, the task becomes a discussion of the information students reveal. The goal of this discussion is to outline what students want to get out of college. The outcome of this stage is not defined by a course list. It is conceptually based with statements that have the form: "I want to know more about . . . and I want to develop the following skills. . . ."

After a profile begins to emerge, the advisors' knowledge about areas such as campus course offerings, extracurricular opportunities, internship possibilities, and volunteer activities comes into play. In Step 2, credit courses and noncourse experiences (e.g., extracurricular activities, work, internships, and volunteer placements) are listed, constituting a response to Step 1.

Using their knowledge of campus curricula, advisors must see how the list of courses generated in Step 2 compares to existing majors. The major/minor that presents the closest correspondence to a student's list is a prime target for choice of major/minor. Course gaps can then be filled with independent study, work-study, and so forth, and gaps that cannot be filled with credit courses can be filled with extracurricular activities.

Figure 2 shows one adaptive version of a handout that advisors can use. Step 1—Part A can have many questions. Other questions we have used include:

1. How important to you as a life-long ambition is doing good work.
2. If you could earn a comfortable living no matter what path you followed, and if money were not an issue, what would you like to be doing for the 5 years that follow graduation?
3. Picture yourself going to your job: What time is it? What are you wearing? Where are you going (e.g., an office, a factory, inside, outside)?
4. Picture yourself on the job: Are you working alone or in a group? To whom do you report and how much power does this person have over you? Who reports to you, and how much supervision do you give to this person?

Step 1—Part B may include more general questions.

1. What constitutes good writing?
2. How does literature reflect society?
3. How does knowledge of the past give us knowledge about what is to come?
4. How do children think?
5. What are the strengths and weaknesses of different teaching techniques?
6. How can society solve our urban problems?
7. How do different cultures look at common social conventions such as family, work, relationships?
8. How does disease affect the body?
9. How does exercise affect mental and physical health?

We do not want to give the impression that this is a quick formula to working with undecided students. It is simply a way to get past the more mundane parts of the advising process, and it provides the advisor with important clues regarding directions to pursue in the advising process. For many undecided students, how colleges and universities are structured and the nature of the underlying philosophies of the various curricula make little or no sense. And in too many instances this is due to the fact that many college curricula—at least as they are outlined in catalogs—may not make much sense. The process we are outlining should let advisors and students think and work creatively with programs and curricula.

Chris is the first-semester sophomore represented in Figure 1. An abbreviated summary of Chris's response to Step 1 is represented below.

I enjoy being with people. I get a lot of rewards from helping people solve problems, and my friends frequently come to me for my advice. I'm a good listener, and I'm pretty good at speaking, both to groups and with individuals. I'm a relatively organized person in my own way, but I don't like to pay attention to organization. I don't think I'd be a good manager or leader. I like to have fun with physical activities, and I have an artistic aspect to my life, as well. One of my favorite activities is the time I spend in the local Big Sister/Big Brother Volunteer Organization. I'm paired with a six-year-old kid who comes from a single parent family. I enjoy spending time with this child, and I find that I'm having opportunities to interact with the mother and siblings, too, in a very positive way. I had a great experience as a camp counselor last summer, and I think this somehow feeds into my positive feel-

ings about my Big Sister role. On a practical level, I'd like to gain more skills that would enable me to do better in this type of situation, but I think I need a better understanding of children, family dynamics, and the overall socio/economics of families of this sort, as well. I think I'd like to look into working with children, but not necessarily as a teacher, but with children and families as a conceptual theme and with interactional skills as a practical theme.

In Step 2, Chris and her advisor came up with the following list:

Knowledge about children and families: Introduction to Family Ecology; Comparative Family Organization; Growth and Physical Development in Children; Community Psychology; Race and Ethnicity; Juvenile Delinquency.

Skills to deliver services: The Delivery of Leisure Services; Introduction to Outdoor Recreation; Community Projects: Working with Adolescents; Educational Campaign Planning; Small Group Interactions; Art in the Elementary Grades; Introduction to Organizational Communication; Interpersonal Communication.

Experience with children of different ages: Volunteer work at the local YMCA/YWCA; volunteer work at a local day care center; internship at the local shelter for women and children; summer employment at a camp for inner-city youth; volunteer with Sierra Club's program for taking inner-city youth backpacking; Outward Bound experience.

At this point in the course-list process, Chris had several choices of major to pursue: psychology, child development, and recreation. The choice of direction had much to do with future plans and directions. Chris felt that she wanted to be able to deliver clinically oriented mental health services to children and adolescents with a possibility of providing these services in an activity oriented setting, such as in group homes or in outdoor challenge types of settings. She eventually decided to major in psychology and was able to weave her content courses into her major. She then constructed a minor that incorporated those important courses that would not fit into her major and used elective credit to accommodate the other courses from her list. She found that she wanted to convert theory to practice, as well, so she negotiated with a faculty member an independent study project that pulled together her background in adolescent psychology, juvenile delinquency, and outdoor leadership to design and implement a weekend backpack trip for at-risk teens from her local community.

In a second instance, we advised a student who

wanted to study everything. According to him, he had already taken the tests, but forgot their names. "They say I could do just about anything, and that doesn't help much." He loved going to school, but admitted, "I don't know how to make all these decisions." He had equally strong academic interests in social sciences, art, philosophy, and biology. When we talked about his personal interests he mentioned that he was a vegetarian, a believer in massage therapy (an area in which he was pursuing certification outside of college), exercised regularly, and did all his grocery shopping at health food stores.

What he laid out, but could not see, were the basics of his student profile. It took a few more minutes to help him realize that he did have a strong personal interest in health care—alternative health care. From here the steps became fairly simple. He was referred to the premed advisor and he researched alternative health care (e.g., naturopathic medicine requires similar premed studies), studied the difference between allopathic and osteopathic medical training, and looked at whom medical schools admit.

Not all students are concerned with defining a future career. Many undecided liberal arts students focus on their intellectual development and are comfortable with deferring career concerns. Stevie loved poetry and wanted to learn all she could about it. She also loved to write poetry. Her choice of major looked obvious—English. But Stevie was intrigued with the question: "How did those poets learn how to make their writing so rich?" Stevie realized that English department courses did not really address those questions. She began to read the letters written by the poets she studied. Stevie then sat down with her advisor and explored what could be learned from these letters. Stevie noticed that all of these poets looked at poetry as art, and all had an active interest in other arts. Through discussions with her advisor, Stevie began to realize that all artists worked in a medium—that painters understood brush strokes, canvas, and different paint media (oil, watercolor, monographics)—that musicians looked at sounds and silences, tempo, pitch, timing—and so forth.

Stevie then began to break down the elements of her interests. To realize the medium—language—she began to take course work in linguistics. She picked up her interest in music and took courses in theory and music history. She began to look at course work in aesthetics from philosophy. She took courses in film to study how image, words, and sound came together. She looked at art history courses, especially those interdisciplinary courses that looked at how different cultural and social influences affected how artists looked at and worked with

their art. And of course, she looked at every opportunity either to write or to work with writing. She worked on her campus newspaper, worked on the student literary journal, tutored in the writing lab, went to poetry readings, and of course, wrote poetry.

Stevie knew that poets do not make money from their poetry. She knew that most worked in colleges or in high schools as teachers. Stevie did not want to go to graduate school and did not want to teach in high school. She did not know what she wanted to do professionally—but she did want to write poetry. During her senior year, she worked with career development professionals to develop a portfolio and began looking for jobs that focused on writing. Stevie is now a team director for an environmental engineering firm—coordinating grant writing and report writing. She is also a member of a poets' roundtable and occasionally publishes her poems.

By helping the student self-define her profile, the advisor helped her learn how to research the learning opportunities the college affords. The scheme lets advisors assist students in doing their own educational research and learn how any major can be tailored into student-personalized fields of study.

Conclusion

The scheme we present is meant to initiate a productive dialogue. One of its most important features is to keep the student at the center of the process, conceptualizing the institution as a support structure rather than a structure into which the student must fit. Obviously, the student must fit into the institution's structure to declare a major and graduate. But, by turning the tables and putting students' overall educational goals at the center of this scheme, students can realize that they can take a great degree of personal responsibility and initiative in constructing their college experiences, with their majors being only one component of the overall plan. The major, as developed in this scheme, has the potential to be more personally conceptualized and better understood by students than in instances where majors are merely chosen from the palate of choices presented by the course catalog.

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Authors' Notes

Howard Schein is Director of the Unit one Living/Learning Program, Assistant Director of Housing for Academic Programs, and Adjunct Assistant Professor of Educational Organization and Leadership at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. For more information, contact Howard Schein at h-schein@uiuc.edu.

Ned Scott Laff is Director for Academic Advising at Weber State University.