

The Advanced Undecided College Student: A Qualitative Study

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This qualitative study examined 16 advanced undecided college students at a large Midwestern research university and identified eight themes in their experiences with undecidedness: a) frustration, anxiety, and hopelessness; b) fear of commitment; c) fear of judgment; d) self-doubt and low self-esteem; e) difficulty setting goals; f) family issues; g) reluctance to seek help; and h) the desire for a personal, caring advising relationship. All of the students viewed undecidedness as a distressing experience, and all seemed to need help developing good decision-making skills. Additional conclusions, observations, and advising implications are discussed.

Many college students seek the assistance of advisors because they are undecided about their academic major and career goals. In fact, for many advisors, undecided students constitute a substantial percentage of those whom they help. Being an undecided student seems to be the norm rather than the exception at universities across the nation (Lewallen, 1995). It has been consistently reported that between 20% and 60% of entering college students admit to being undecided (Astin, 1977; Crites, 1969; Hayes, 1997). Moreover, it is estimated that 77% of all first- and second-year students are undecided (McDaniels, Carter, Heinzen, Candrl, & Wieberg, 1994, as cited in Rayman, 1993). Many continue to be undecided into their junior and senior years. In the College of Liberal Arts at the University of Minnesota—Twin Cities, 12% of juniors and 2% of seniors are undecided.

The research literature on undecided students dates back to the 1920s (Lewallen, 1995). Much of the research has attempted to identify a) different types of undecided students, such as those developmentally undecided versus chronically undecided (Hartman, Fuqua, & Blum, 1985; Larson, Heppner, Ham, & Dugan, 1988), and b) characteristics of these students (e.g., anxiety levels, problem-solving skills, ego-identity status) and how they differ from those of decided students (Gordon & Kline, 1989; Newman, Fuqua, & Minger, 1990; Newman, Fuqua, & Seaworth, 1989). These studies have typically used quantita-

tive designs to address their research questions. Such methods are appropriate and effective, and they provide empirical data from which generalizations can be made; however, they do have limitations. By reducing student experiences to statistics, they mask individual differences and perspectives. Quantitative studies often produced contradictory results.

On the other hand, qualitative studies address individual differences and perspectives. They focus on personal experiences, striving to capture their richness and uniqueness. Through in-depth interviews, among other methods, the researcher's task is to understand the essence of the subject's experience—"treat[ing] every word as having the potential of unlocking the mystery of the subject's way of viewing the world" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982, p. 137). Qualitative methods are especially useful for producing full and integrated descriptions of an experience and for illuminating meanings through a search for patterns (Patton, 1990). Such an understanding is not achieved by random subject selection or the many other requirements of quantitative research designs, but rather by strict adherence to the methodological assumptions of qualitative designs (Hoshmand, 1989; Patton, 1990).

While interest in qualitative research on college students is increasing (Patton, 1991; Whitt, 1991), we found a lack of qualitative studies on undecided students. We were unable to locate a single study of undecided students that used a qualitative design. Very little, if any, reported research exists on the experience of undecidedness as seen through the eyes of the student.

One criticism of many studies—and one potential reason for many of the contradictory findings—is that many of them use students sampled from introductory college courses (e.g., introductory psychology). Such samples tend to contain high numbers of first-year students, who are typically just beginning the process of exploring their academic and vocational interests. They may not yet have enough information to make decisions about their interests and goals. Moreover, most of them are still making the adjustment to college, a stressful process for some

(Larson et al., 1988). With several years of college ahead of them, first-year students are usually not as distressed about being undecided as students who have already invested a substantial amount of time and money in college. Advanced students also tend to experience more pressure to select a major, a requirement for graduation, than first-year students (Larson et al., 1988). Advanced students tend to possess more information about academic and vocational choices, but many still have trouble making satisfying decisions. Thus, this group serves as a rich source of information on the undecidedness experience.

Methodology

Setting

This study was conducted in the College of Liberal Arts Premajor Advising Office at the University of Minnesota (38,000 students) in the Twin Cities (population: 2.5 million). The Premajor Advising Office helps liberal arts undergraduates in many ways, including class registering, selecting courses, and choosing majors. The students at the University of Minnesota are predominately white (80%) and balanced between males and females.

Participants

In a qualitative study, the goal in selecting participants is not a random sample, but a knowledge-rich sample—one that can illuminate the deeper structure of the research question. We selected advanced undecided students as follows. In the College of Liberal Arts Premajor Advising Office, several advisors assist undecided undergraduates. However, students who have accumulated 60 or more quarter credits (one third of the minimum number required for graduation) and still have not declared a major, a requirement for graduation, are assigned to the “undecided student specialist.” This advisor addresses concerns about selecting a major and helps the student ensure that his or her education is on track. In this context, students are referred to as “advanced” undecided students because of the number of completed credits.

At the time this research was conducted, 221 advanced undecided liberal arts undergraduates (149 sophomores and 72 juniors) were assigned to the undecided student specialist and invited to join the study. Twenty-five of these students agreed to participate. Nine were subsequently excluded for personal reasons or because they selected a major before being interviewed for the study. Of the remaining volunteers, eight were

women and eight were men. All were white. Nine of the students were sophomores, and seven were juniors. The average number of quarter credits completed by each student was 85 (71.5 for sophomores; 101.5 for juniors) with a range of 64.5 to 124. Ages ranged from 20 to 36 years, with a mean of 21.7 years. None had any previous contact with the researchers in this study.

Procedure

All participants were interviewed by the first author in the College of Liberal Arts Premajor Advising Office. An interview guide covering predetermined topics selected from the research literature was used as a way to ensure that an efficient and systematic information-gathering method was used for all participants (Patton, 1990). The interviews consisted of 22 questions which addressed several topics, including feelings and thoughts about being undecided and efforts made to select a major. Two pilot interviews were conducted with other sample populations to refine the questions.

Interviews were first transcribed and then read multiple times, initially to provide a global understanding of individual cases and the relationship between them and later, to assign codes according to meaningful units and categories discovered. The “file folder” method (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982) was used to organize codes and themes. We identified and coded specific topics in each transcription and then filed them by larger themes to discover both the common experiences among participants and differences within categories. As sorting progressed, emerging theories were developed and refined to illuminate the essential recurring features of the undecidedness phenomenon for these students (Patton, 1990). Finally, an attempt was made both to create a structural synthesis containing the essential meaning of the experience (Patton, 1990) and to offer a tentative understanding of the variations and commonalities among the participants.

Results

Presented below are the major themes that emerged in the study.

Theme One: Frustration, Anxiety, and Hopelessness

As the undecided students talked about the emotional effects of their situations, they revealed a depth and range of feelings not always observable in the average advising contact. Being undecided typically had an intense effect upon a student. Alienation, confusion, discomfort, stress,

disappointment, anger, and depression were all mentioned, as were, on occasion, excitement and freedom. The most frequently noted emotions were hopelessness, anxiety, and most common of all, frustration:

I know that I get frustrated being undecided, but I get even more frustrated going to visit my parents and being there and talking with them about being undecided. . . . It's like, God, I've got to find something. I have to find something. (Hannah)

Frustration is the biggest one, especially now I'm in my third year. I get a lot of frustration [when others ask], "How's school going, and what are you doing with your education, what are you majoring in?". . . I'm down in the dumps because of that. Just thinking I need to do something. Getting frustrated because I don't have anything. (Carl)

It's getting frustrating to stay in school when I don't have a goal in sight, and I don't know what I want to do. Sometimes it's like I just want to quit school. I just want to be done with it. (Rachel)

Students also expressed anxiety about possibly never finding a major:

My freshman year I didn't really worry about it. My sophomore year I started thinking about it, but I didn't really worry about it because I was told that you didn't have to choose until you were a junior. So then I put it off until then. And I started worrying about it over the summer, and this year I've been worrying a lot. (Jacob)

Many described feelings of hopelessness and being overwhelmed, a sense that their situation would never improve:

I'm feeling kind of hopeless. It makes me feel that way about life in general sometimes . . . because it's a big decision: What are you gonna do with the rest of your life? I start feeling kind of depressed about it and it's like I don't know what I'm gonna do. . . . I've always been hopeful. It lasts for a while and it ends up going right back down. (Rachel)

I just wanted to give it up. I just wanted to drop it down some hole, walk over it. . . . It's just like I didn't want to think about it at the time—about school and my parents and

jobs and financial problems and all the stuff that goes along with that. (Hannah)

Theme Two: Fear of Commitment

Fears of all kinds surfaced for these students, particularly fear of commitment. Many saw the decision of which major to select as a final all-important choice that would greatly influence or control the rest of their lives. Seeing the process in terms of making a "right" or "wrong" choice was common:

I feel that if I make a choice it's final and I can't change it. I want to be absolutely sure that it's what I want. (Joseph)

I have this feeling that I'm sort of close to making a decision and then sometimes the closer I get . . . I start to really get more and more interested in all the other things I'm learning. It's kind of a way to catch myself from what I'm doing. . . . Sometimes I feel safer having not made the decision. (Sarah)

I think part of it might be fear of the unknown. . . . I'm afraid of picking one thing and being wrong, so I don't pick anything. . . . Part of it is I don't know what area I want to be in and part of it is fear of failure. (Rachel)

The students often saw choosing a major as closing off options. Others saw selecting a major as limiting their opportunities to use their talents. Still others were afraid that they would only have access to a few careers:

When I get close to [choosing a major], I feel like I'm just slamming all the doors on all my other possibilities, like I'm just closing off so many options. (Sarah)

I have all this other stuff inside of me. I have all these different talents. I wish I wouldn't have to choose a title. (Tim)

You get in it [a major] and realize, "Oh this is really happening, this is too scary. . . ." I want it to happen, but I don't. . . . You always have dreams, but if they start coming true, you don't have anything to dream about anymore. . . . It was so scary to be actually doing it that I dropped it. (Hannah)

Theme Three: Fear of Judgment

The students were very concerned with how they appeared to others. Feelings of embarrassment and inferiority were common. Many felt

they were perceived as lazy or uncommitted:

There is a negative image of undecided students: "Those people don't know what they want to do. They have no focus. . . ." It's kind of like an air-head-type stereotype. (Marcus)

It's just not because we're lazy, we're just confused. (Cathy)

I feel in some ways ashamed that I don't have a major. (Steve)

People constantly ask, "Well, what are you doing?" I see my friends from high school and they'll ask, "Oh, so what's your major?" It's embarrassing to say, "Well, you know, I don't know. I'm just going there. I don't know why." (Kary)

I don't want to be undecided. Just give me a title or something! I hate it! I'm undecided. Everyone else is decided. . . . You kind of feel [pressured] when you say you're undecided in a classroom. Because you're in a class with sophomores and juniors and everyone else is saying that they're decided. So it's a little peer pressure thing. Peer pressure doesn't really bother me, but, of course, when you're hearing everybody else having made their decision, and you haven't, you kind of feel, "Geez, I've been here three years and I haven't come to a decision!" (Tim)

Theme Four: Self-Doubt and Low Self-Esteem

Every student in this study reported some degree of self-doubt or low self-esteem. Many wondered whether they could succeed—whether they could make it in school. Some feared they would never find anything they could do well:

I have fear that I'm not going to be good at anything. Maybe I shouldn't major in anything because I'm not going to be good at it. (Joseph)

I feel like there's never a career I'm going to really like or be good at. It makes me feel like . . . a really insecure little kid sometimes. (Rachel)

Many felt that something was wrong with them because they were unable to select a major:

That's probably one of the reasons why I haven't come in [for advising help], because I felt bad. I didn't know if there

was something wrong with me. (Diana)

I should just be able to figure out what I want to do, it kind of bugs me. . . . There must be some kind of problem [with me] if I can't make a decision. (Marcus)

I should have a goal. I have a brain that's working. Why haven't I put it together yet? It's like I'm kind of not together. Like I'm crazy or something. I can't do it. . . . I have all these things I can do and be successful in, but why can't I put it together? (Tim)

What's wrong with me? Why can't I do it? (Nan)

Theme Five: Difficulty Setting Goals

One theme that cut across almost every story was a sense of aimlessness, both in school and in life. This lack of direction manifested itself in many ways. Most common were feelings of being stuck, having no clear view of the future, wasting time and money, having difficulty selecting classes, and seeing no point to course work. Some felt they were in the same place they were in several years ago, having made no progress at all toward picking a major or figuring out life goals.

Those having no clear view of the future could see no purpose to their actions, no final payoff. For these students, being undecided led to an inability to plan graduation dates, set life goals, or even start life. It seemed that many ambitions were put on hold in anticipation of this potentially life-altering choice:

Confusion. What is my life going to amount to? Which way am I headed? I am always wondering . . . where I'm going to go from here and I don't really have any course that I'm on. I'm just wandering around aimlessly and it is like a big question mark: What is my future? It just kind of bugs me sometimes. Most of my friends know what they want to be. I don't know what I want to be. Sometimes that really bothers me. (Marcus)

I don't see myself ever graduating because I don't have a major. . . . I wish I was going somewhere. . . . It's like floating along in the air. . . . I just feel like I don't really have a goal. It's hard to make life goals. . . when I don't even have the foundation. (Rachel)

Many students identified personality characteristics, such as perfectionism, as factors con-

tributing to their difficulties. Some found themselves trapped by paralyzing behaviors such as all-or-nothing thinking or obsessive worrying:

I have a really hard time setting any long-term goals. I have a hard time doing very small steps towards a big goal. I like to get things done all at once. . . . When I think of a major, I start thinking about the career possibilities, and I start thinking about the entire rest of my life, which is just too much to try and figure out in one afternoon or one night. But I always end up looking at the whole picture which is just too overwhelming to figure out. (Sarah)

One older student spoke of having an unclear sense of identity, which included a lack of knowledge about what her interests, values, and goals might be:

I never really got asked those questions [about academic interests]. I think the assumption was that after you graduate from high school you'll get a job as a secretary and then you'll get married. . . . I feel I'm left with a real vague idea of myself and what it is that I'm supposed to be doing. (Luanne)

Theme Six: Family Issues

Most students (88%) reported that one or both of their parents did not attend or graduate from college. They also reported that their parents wanted them to have better life experiences—such as those associated with a college degree and a wider range of career opportunities—than they had known. However, for some students, their parents' inexperience with college resulted in a lack of understanding and poor assistance in choosing a major:

Both of my folks did not go to college, and they think it's great that I am going to college and doing something in that way. What I get into they couldn't care less. . . . They want me to be happy, so basically everything's up to me. (Carl)

They didn't go to college and they say, "Do whatever you want." My mom, she just says, "Do what you want, it's your decision," as long as I go. She never got to go. . . . My dad wanted to. They couldn't do that because I was born and they were married, so they really want me to finish school. (Marcus)

Those who felt pressure from their families generally felt it was unhelpful. Some told of the advice they were given:

I had a lot of pressure from my parents, mostly my dad [who said], "If you can do it [engineering], you should do it because you will guarantee yourself a stable job and a steady income," which he has always felt is very important. . . . I know that pressure comes from my parents because they tell me to just pick a major and get done. (Sarah)

They wouldn't really say, "No, you can't do that, don't do that." They would be kind of subtle and underhanded: "What kind of jobs do you think you can get with that major?" (Sarah)

Theme Seven: Reluctance to Seek Help

Several students believed advisors could not help them in any way. A few thought that asking for help might actually make their situation worse because it would add stress or pressure to decide:

They can't tell me anything that I don't already know. They can't help me reach conclusions any better than I can help myself to do it. . . . I wish they could, but I didn't really believe that they would or could. (Sarah)

If I had come in, I would have just sunk. . . . There wasn't anything that was going to help me. I realized I'd better come and talk with someone but . . . there was nothing I could tell them. . . . They would have just made me feel like I had to make a decision soon. (Hannah)

A number of students told of the fear or embarrassment they felt regarding their visits to the advising office. Many believed that they should not be undecided or that advisors would view them negatively for not having made a decision:

I was kind of scared to go see an advisor. . . . because it seemed kind of silly to me that I hadn't come to see one yet and it was kind of embarrassing, like I've been floating through the university for 2 1/2 years almost now and I haven't sought any help yet. . . . I felt bad. I didn't know if there was something wrong with me. (Diana)

I've always had the idea that going for advising help if you're undecided or not knowing what the heck you're going to do,

you're judged in a way, that you're put in this category. I've never liked that. I've felt I'd be looked down upon because I had no direction yet. It almost seems like advisors believe [undecided students] are helpless. (Carl)

Theme Eight: The Desire for a Personal, Caring Advising Relationship

The students had very concrete ideas about what kind of advising relationship they would like—the type of person they wanted to work with, the kind of help they wanted, and what advice would be helpful. They wanted a personal relationship, individual attention, and to know that someone cared about them and their problems:

[I'd like it] if they [advisors] would ask me questions about interests, dreams, goals, things I'd like to do. (Rachel)

It would be nice if advisors would get more personally involved and try to delve down to the real issues of why you're undecided, try to help you with that instead of just throwing a bunch of information at you and a bunch of pamphlets and things: "Read these and go to it." (Diana)

[I'd want an advisor] who I could talk to, who I'd feel comfortable with, who kind of, even sort of knew me, where there was some sort of a relationship. . . . I'd like them to be excited about what they're doing. . . . Someone who's advising people who are undecided, they'd have to be at least able to understand it a little bit. (Nan)

I'd like somebody very understanding. They just have to understand that every person is different, and that every person is going to have their own problem, and be willing to listen to them and just kind of go step-by-step. (Cathy)

The students also had specific and sometimes conflicting ideas about what they would and would not like to hear from advisors:

One thing I really don't like is coming in and sitting down in an office and having a counselor sit here and go, "Todd, it's okay to be undecided." That really gnaws on me. . . . That makes me think that maybe I should be worrying about this. This person is telling me [not to worry] and the minute

I leave, I seem to be surrounded by people who seem to know exactly what to do. (TJ)

[Undecided students] just need somebody who is not directly involved to say, "Calm down, you're not as bad as you think. You'll get out in four or five years and that is not that long if you think about everything." (Cathy)

Don't present the idea that it's hopeless. I think the thing that made me feel that everything was hopeless was to keep hearing that my GPA wasn't up there where it should be. . . . Be as encouraging as possible. (Jacob)

I think a little pressure definitely wouldn't hurt because I don't know what I'm doing. It's kind of a tough situation, being undecided. A little bit of sympathy, a little bit of pressure, a good mix here. (Luanne)

Finally, the students wanted advisors to understand the fear, discomfort, and alienation that accompany their situations:

I guess I'd like [advisors] to know that it is kind of scary. I don't think they really know. (Diana)

We're scared. Just listen to us and don't be afraid to give advice. (Rachel)

[I'd want them to know] that it is very hard, very disheartening to know that you don't even know what you want to do. It seems like you're just in school for no reason, wasting your money. There is nothing, you're just taking up space. (Cathy)

[The advisor] should understand that the student's probably scared and uncertain. That's why he's undecided in the first place. (Jacob)

Discussion

The Undecidedness Experience

The picture painted by the 16 advanced undecided students is one of great complexity. Being undecided after attending college for some time was distressing, and all of the students viewed it as a negative experience. Feeling isolated, ashamed, unmotivated, directionless, frustrated, hopeless, and concerned about what others think was common.

The experience of undecidedness for these stu-

dents went beyond merely having difficulty selecting one of many possible majors. Although the dilemma was often presented as such, usually hidden beneath the search for a major was a host of concerns and problems—family issues, stress, fears, unrealistic beliefs, and goal-setting problems, among others. Addressing these underlying issues is probably necessary when assisting these students. Indeed, many efforts to help undecided students fail because advisors work with them to develop and implement plans for selecting a major before fully appreciating the hidden barriers that prevent the students from making choices.

One significant roadblock that most of the students in this study faced was the possession of unrealistic views about the process and implications of choosing a major. For example, most of the students anticipated that selecting a major would have positive results (e.g., relief, satisfaction, confidence, and the ability to make plans for life), but they also feared that it would have substantial, long-term consequences, namely that it would rigidly set the direction of their careers and close off options. This apparent discrepancy may reflect the students' strong focus on making the "right" decision, one with which they could feel satisfied; however, it may also reflect a naive view about the effects of choosing a major. Selecting a major will not give them answers to all of the questions about what they want to do with their lives, nor will it send them down an unchangeable career path, one they will be committed to for life.

Advising Implications

For the undecided students in this study, recognizing, understanding, and beginning to remove the roadblocks is the first step in the larger process of learning how to make good decisions, such as choosing a major that will satisfy their needs and desires. While the students are a heterogeneous group in many ways, with varying concerns, levels of distress, and needs, all of them seem to require help developing good decision-making skills and strategies. In fact, the lack of such abilities appears to be a central, immobilizing deficit in our sample group. Thus, it would be insufficient, even misguided, for advisors to try to help them simply by providing information on various majors or by working with them to identify interests and abilities. To assist these students effectively, advisors need to do more than merely help the students pick a major and a career direction; they need to help the students develop an awareness of their decision-making processes and

help them learn how to make good, satisfying, well-informed decisions.

Learning how to make good decisions will benefit the students far beyond selecting a major. Indeed, the rewards can be lifelong. For example, given the likelihood that the students will change careers during their lives, possibly several times, good decision-making skills can help them make satisfying choices and avoid problems with self-doubt when these career changes occur.

Based on the students' statements, it appears that for advisors to be successful in their efforts with the students, they need to build rapport and establish a close relationship with them. Most of the students expressed a desire to work with an advisor who would take the time to ask about, listen to, and understand their concerns—to establish a personal advising relationship with them—not merely provide information. Thus, the students would likely appreciate an advising approach in which the advisor a) demonstrates empathy, understanding, and encouragement; b) feels comfortable discussing the student's personal concerns; and c) provides information.

If practical, a series of ongoing appointments with the same advisor might help to establish a trusting working alliance in which the student feels comfortable discussing the problem and feels motivated to work on developing decision-making skills. Group advising may also be an option to help the students see that they are not alone or abnormal because they are undecided. In some cases, referrals for personal counseling or psychotherapy may be appropriate.

Conclusion

With a small, single-institution sample, it is difficult to generalize the results, observations, and conclusions above to other groups of undecided students; however, "[t]he 'paramount objective' . . . of qualitative research is understanding, rather than the ability to generalize or the identification of causes and effects" (Whitt, 1991, p. 407). Our purpose was to describe and understand undecidedness through the eyes of 16 undergraduates to appreciate the experience from a personal viewpoint. Seldom do advisors have the time or opportunity to solicit such personal, in-depth information and feedback from students. This study may help to illuminate the concerns and stresses that some undecided students face and issues that advisors need to consider when helping them. The nature of the university in this study (e.g., location, advising policies, student

characteristics) may be a factor in the results obtained; thus, this study may be most useful to those in similar contexts.

It was not our intention to study particular advising strategies (e.g., specific ways to help undecided students develop good decision-making skills); thus, this issue serves as a topic for future research. Another potential direction for future research is the extent to which being a first-generation college student impacts being undecided. Follow-up research on the students in the present study could be done to identify what, if anything, ultimately helped them select majors.

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