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Career Indecision: A Dilemma & A Solution

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Career indecision is prevalent on the college campus. It not only presents a problem to the student, but also serious concerns for the academic advisor. This article describes and documents a successful career counseling program that became an integral part of an academic advising office.

Consider the following dialogues between an academic advisor and a college student concerned about a major.

CASE I

Advisor: So you don't know what you want to be.

Student: No, I really don't know.

Advisor: Give me some idea of some things that you have considered.

Student: Well that's pretty difficult to do because you see I've considered about everything at one time or another. I can't seem to come up with any decision; yet, I know I must make a decision soon. I just can't continue taking courses in all of these areas when I really don't know what I want to be.

Advisor: It sounds like you are saying "I'm running out of time and I'm getting pretty anxious about selecting a college major."

CASE II

Student: I came in today because I'm so unhappy with my major. I thought I wanted a major in math, but now that I'm here in college I know that math isn't for me.

Advisor: You say you know you don't want a major in math but do you have any idea(s) about what you want to major in?

Student: Not really. Oh! I have thought of other things, but I really don't know. Honestly, I don't know what I'm suited for, about all I know about this major is that I want to stay in college.

Advisor: It sounds like you know you want to be in college but beyond that you are very unsure about what you should major in.

Student: I'm afraid that's about right.

THE DILEMMA

It is apparent from the two examples that a career dilemma exists for each student. In the first, the student came to college undecided about a major and has remained undecided. In the second, the student selected a major, and after taking courses in the major area became unhappy with the choice.

Astin,¹ Burns and Kishler,² Gordon,³ and Lunneborg⁴ have written articles about the first example, the "undecided student." Their studies indicate that 22 to 50 percent of the college students fall into the undecided category. The figures are higher in the second example, "changing of major," when students select a major, then later change it. The writers, Astin, Burns and Kishler, and Hoffman and Grande⁵ estimate that 50 to 60 percent change their major during a four-year college enrollment. A review of the studies by these writers reveals that many students have a serious problem of choosing a major. This problem creates additional difficulties for the university and the academic advisor.

All students were requested to participate in an exit interview to ascertain why they decided to leave college. Data was collected on 58 students and the findings were as follows:

1. Students were leaving during their first and third semesters;
2. Students left school without exploring career options; and
3. Students leaving had few career plans.

These findings resulted in the establishment of a Career Counseling component in the Academic Advising Office. The *Career Decision Kit* (CDK) was designed as an important tool for the career counseling program.

THE SOLUTION

Career Decision Kit

The Career Decision Kit (CDK) is divided into six phases. These phases allow the student to progress from the initial exploration of personal attributes, abilities, interests and values to the selection of a major area of study that supports his/her career goals. The basic premise underlying the CDK is represented by a career cone (Figure 1).

The cone concept assumes that students know their dislikes, and are often unsure of the careers they do like. The cone is built on the premise that "knowing yourself" must precede any study of a career. After students clarify and identify their values, tempera-

¹Astin, A.W. *Four Critical Years*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1977).

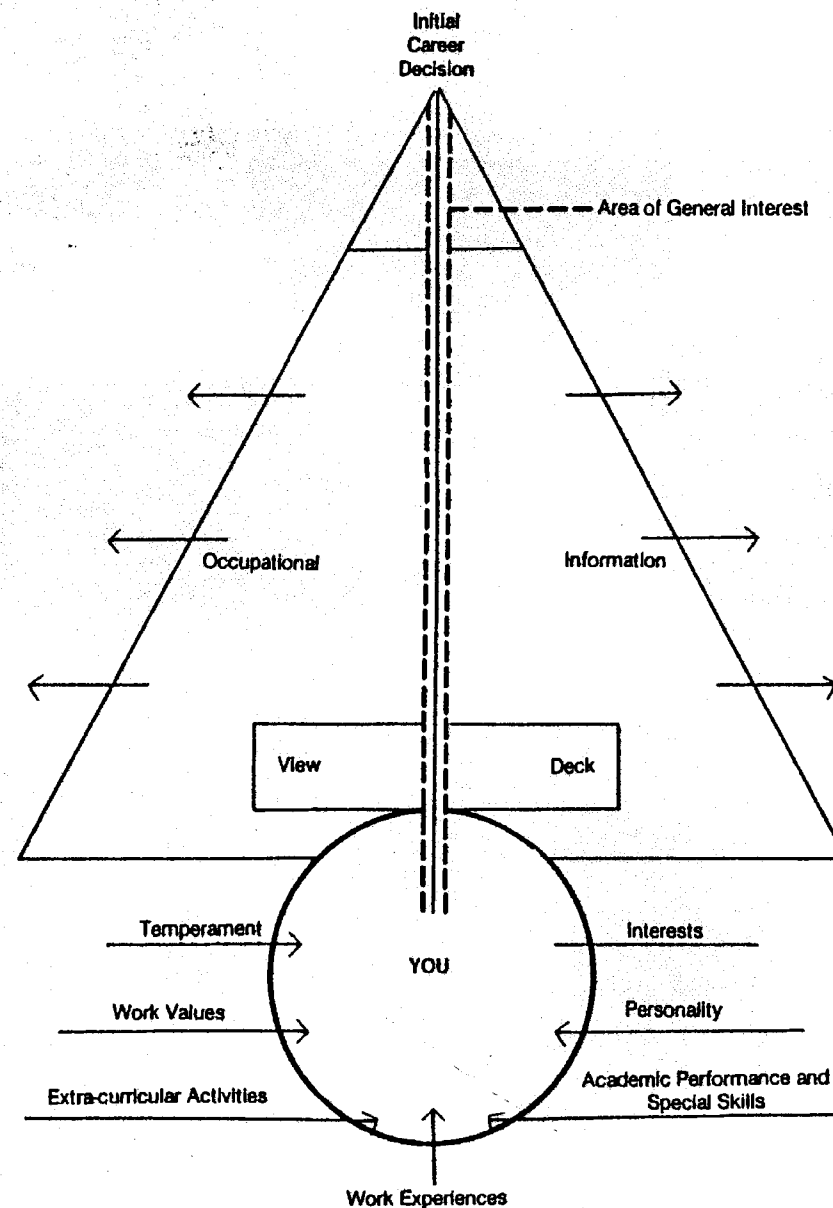
²Burns, K.N. & Kishler, T.C. *Centralized Academic Advising at Michigan State*. (East Lansing, Michigan: University College, 1972).

³Gordon, V.N. The Undecided Student: A Developmental Perspective. *Personnel and Guidance Journal*, 59, 1981, 433-439.

⁴Lunneborg, P. Interest Differentiation in High School and Vocational Indecision in College. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 7, (1975), 299-303.

⁵Hoffman, E.T. & Grande, P.P. Academic Advising: Matching Students' Career Skills and Interests. In E. Watkins (Ed.), *Preparing Liberal Arts Students for Careers*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1979).

FIGURE 1.



ment, interests, traits, past work experiences, academic performance and leisure activities, they have the necessary information for career decision making.

For example, once the student has taken the time to consider (with the help of an academic advisor) the relationship between the above factors, and has sufficient self-awareness to begin to explore career information, the student leaves the circle at the bottom of the cone and enters the career cone process.

When the student moves toward a career decision (represented by the vertical line moving to the apex of the cone), the advisor involves that student in an occupational information search. To aid in the search, the authors used the *Chronicle Guidance View-Deck*.⁶ Other resources used were the *Dictionary of Occupational Titles*,⁷ *Occupational Outlook Handbook*⁸ and a basic library of occupational briefs. The academic advisor helps the student to compare the information about him/herself (information obtained from earlier assessment of interests, values, work experiences, etc.) with the career information obtained from the vocational resources. If those careers do not utilize the student's particular abilities, interests, values and personal traits, they are rejected (indicated by the arrows on the cone). Through the elimination process, which is reflected in the narrowing cone, the student will be left with an increased awareness of a cluster of related careers which do provide interest. It is at this point that the academic advisor and student begin to make specific plans (e.g. visitations with persons employed in the career, listening to tapes describing the career) to see if a career(s) can be found that provides a match between the student's needs and the world of work requirements.

EVALUATION OF THE PROGRAM

The career counseling program has been a part of the academic advising office since March, 1976. Its referrals mainly come from three sources, academic advisors, faculty and students. The program has served 1091 students.

Out of the 1091 students, 713 (65 percent) completed the program, and according to follow-up evaluations, the students said the program helped them determine a more satisfactory course of study. One-hundred and sixty-seven (167) students are still actively involved in the program. Only 211 students (19 percent) did not complete the career counseling program. The majority (156 of the 211) did not complete the program because they withdrew from the university.

The above figures indicate success. When researchers have reported 50 to 60 percent of college students are unhappy with their majors, it is encouraging to find that this program has been effective for at least 65 percent of its participants (percent will very likely be higher since data are not available for the 167 current participants). Comparison of attrition data prior to and after the establishment of the career program, points to success. Students participating in the program and their academic advisors have rated the program

⁶*Chronicle Guidance Occupational View-Deck*. (Moravia, N.Y.: Chronicle Guidance Publications, Inc., 1979).

⁷U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration. *Dictionary of Occupational Titles*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1977).

⁸U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics & Security. *Occupational Outlook Handbook*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1980).

as highly effective. Faculty have described the participants as better directed toward career endeavors.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Career indecision is prevalent on college campuses and it presents problems for the student, the academic advisor and the parent(s). Recognizing the need to assist the undecided student, the academic advising office established a career counseling program.

The major thrust of the program was a *Career Decision Kit* which was designed to help the student become more aware of career needs and relate the career needs to career options that were available.

Although researchers have reported that 50 to 60 percent of college students fell into the undecided category, the above finding, that 65 percent of the participants became decided, provides encouragement for the development of career-decision models. Since this component has added a new (and successful) approach to the academic advising office, it is recommended that other advising offices consider it or a similar model. This type of program can present potential resources in time and dollars for the student and academic advising office.

A final and important point is the valuable resources that may be made available to students and members of the academic advising office. The addition of a person to serve as advisor for career counseling allows the academic advisors to assist with strictly advising problems. Since most academic advisors are not trained (nor do they have the interest) to do in-depth career counseling, they, along with members of the faculty, welcome the opportunity to be able to refer students to a career advisor (counselor) who will provide the much-needed career counseling component.