Academic Advising Experiences of First-Year Undecided Students: A Qualitative Study

Kyle C. Ellis, The University of Mississippi

Often the frontline campus representatives who interact with undecided students, academic advisors receive the opportunity to offer academic support and guidance during the academic journey, which especially benefits first-year students trying to navigate this new and challenging endeavor. As a result of their unique position, advisors have the potential to influence both students' academic experience and satisfaction with the institution. This qualitative case study focuses on the advising experiences of first-year students who were undecided in their majors while attending a high-research-activity institution. Through individual interviews, participants articulately revealed how they made meaning of academic advising.

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Quality academic advising contributes to the success of undecided students in higher education. For students who have not yet decided upon a major as they transition from high school to college, academic advisors serve as primary connections to the institution. The relationship between the academic advisor and the student facilitates these students' satisfaction, success, and retention (Alexitch, 2002; Habley & Morales, 1998; Yarbrough, 2002). Successful retention programs incorporate effective advising for students who enter college undecided in their majors (Tinto, 2004).

Undecided Students

Gordon (2007) defined students without declared majors as those who are "unwilling, unable, or unready to make educational and/or vocational decisions" (p. x). Students may be undecided about both their educational and occupational goals, or they may have decided in one area, but not the other. For example, a student may enjoy a specific subject and want to spend time and energy attaining as much knowledge as possible in that specific field while an undergraduate, but not identify with a clear occupational interest. A different student may express certainty about pursuit of an occupation but uncertainty about the best program of study for preparing for a career in that specific field (Lewallen, 1994).

Upon review of 15 studies on types of undecided and decided students, Gordon (1998) categorized undecided students into four groups: *tentatively undecided*, *developmentally undecided*, *seriously undecided*, and *chronically indecisive*. Tentatively undecided students possess self-confidence and do not perceive barriers to their goals, and developmentally undecided students need to gather pertinent information and develop decision-making skills; they may express interest in a variety of areas. Seriously undecided students usually present with relatively low self-esteem and limited knowledge of educational and occupational choices. The chronically indecisive students experience excessive anxiety that affects many parts of their lives. They also may not fully know educational and occupational opportunities and may seek approval from others when making a decision.

Although the literature describes the importance of quality academic advising in relation to the success and persistence of undecided students (e.g., Cuseo, 2003; Tinto, 2004), what advising practices work best with first-year undecided students to ensure their persistence? In this study, I extend knowledge about the experiences of undecided students by specifically looking at their perceptions of advising practices and presenting information on those found most helpful.

Method

At the institution of study, approximately 25% of Fall 2010 freshmen entered the university undecided about their majors. In this study, meaningful narrative data were gathered through a series of individual interviews of 30 first-year undecided students. Items addressed experiences encountered by these first-year students during the academic advising process. The participants included 16 males and 14 females, and they reported their ethnicity as 1 Asian, 8 African Americans, and 21 Caucasians. Participant age was not asked, but all participants appeared to fall in the 17- to 19-year-old age range for traditional first-year

Table 1. Six-year graduation rate

Reporting Year	Cohort Year	% Graduated in 4 Years	% Graduated in 5 Years	% Graduated in 6 Years
2004-05	2000	33.00	51.60	55.50
2005-06	2001	29.90	49.00	53.30
2006-07	2002	32.40	50.50	55.60
2007-08	2003	35.30	55.70	60.50

Note. From institutional data

freshmen. All participants received advising in the campus Advising Center.

Data for this study were collected by face-to-face student interviews in each semester and a phone conversation in December during winter semester break. Two research questions guided the study:

RQ1. How do advisees served in the Advising Center describe their experiences with and perspectives on academic advising during the first year of college?

RQ2. How can the Advising Center and the academic advisors better serve these first-year students relative to advisee experiences with and perspectives of the advising process?

Setting

The single-site study was conducted at a large, public institution with a high-research-activity Carnegie classification (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, n.d.). According to institutional research data from 2004–2005 through 2007–2008, an average of 56.23% entering freshmen graduated within six years of matriculation (see Table 1).

Thelin (2009) noted that although a 65% six-year graduation rate is acceptable, few state universities achieve this goal, and many turn to the pool of undecided students, one of the largest populations of entering undergraduates, to remedy the attrition situation. The 2010 freshman cohort at the institution under study included 3,089 students of whom 777 were undecided about a major. By working with the undecided first-year students, advisors can interact with 25% of the freshman class and thus help to facilitate a successful first year and keep undecided students on the path to graduation.

Data Collection

To recruit participants, the Advising Center featured flyers announcing the study. A Center staff member encouraged student participation and after initial advising sessions gave more details about the study to those expressing interest in participating. The 30 participants were selected via purposeful sampling (as per Creswell, 2009), and I conducted interviews in a conference room unassociated with and at a distance from the Advising Center.

Patton's (2002) standardized open-ended interview model minimizes the variation in items posed to participants. To explore students' experiences with academic advising, I used this model to solicit open-ended responses during one-on-one interviews conducted immediately following the students' first academic advising sessions in November 2010. During the interviews, I used an electronic recorder to document the sessions. I presented each participant the series of items designed to elicit students' descriptions of their academic advising expectations and their academic advising experience during their first appointment (see Appendix A).

In March and April 2011, after the students had completed a spring academic advising session, I conducted a second set of interviews, which consisted of items focused on differences in students' fall and spring advising experiences (see Appendix B). Some items mirrored those presented in the fall, and others focused on new topics such as student involvement in the advising process, advising expectations, and advice for future first-year undecided students.

Collection of data throughout the entire first year was a key component of this study. Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2006) noted that through a longitudinal study the data should show growth or change over time. In this type of study, a variety of data collected over time creates a more complete picture of the phenomenon under study than can be obtained with a one-time inquiry.

In December during winter break, I telephoned participants to follow up on the prior face-to-face interviews and to hear about student enrollment plans for the upcoming semester. I used advising notes from these one-time telephone interviews as well as the fall and spring interview transcripts to ensure triangulation; according to Creswell (2008), researchers must validate their findings by triangulating them using multiple sources and data collection points.

Data Analysis

The analysis of data for this study was guided by Creswell's (2009) hierarchical approach. First I transcribed interviews and then reviewed the transcripts, which provided a general sense of the students' responses to each interview question. Next, I and an independent auditor coded the data from the interviews. We discussed discrepancies in coding to reach agreement. Then, using thematic analysis, we compared our coding and developed themes that supported each other's findings. Grouping similar codes into themes, which support the formation of major ideas, builds the cornerstone of qualitative data analysis. As Creswell (2009) advised, the themes generated in this research met three criteria: They displayed multiple perspectives, were supported by diverse quotations, and offered specific evidence. In this study, themes became informational headings and included individual responses that support the findings.

To ensure reliability and validity, I utilized several of Creswell's (2009) key components of qualitative research. Reliability was confirmed by several mechanisms. Transcripts were checked multiple times to avoid transcription mistakes. Adherence to code definitions was strictly followed. Additionally, the use of an independent auditor who read all student interviews and coded the data separately allowed for multiple perspectives that ensured accuracy in the coding and theme development.

The validity strategies used were equally as important as the reliability methods. Triangulation was achieved using data collected from multiple participants over various points of time. Member checking allowed the participants to review the themes and offer comments if applicable. Thick description provided for practical results rich with information. By including descriptions of negative experiences in the findings, the research becomes more applicable and useful in a real-world context.

Findings

Information obtained from these interviews provided rich descriptions about students' advising experiences. Three primary themes emerged: students' initial advising expectations, undecidedness during the first year, and experiences with advising throughout the first year. Because the principal objective focused on capturing student insight regarding personal experiences with academic advising as a first-year undecided student, this qualitative study gave students a voice about the quality of academic advising received. The data came directly from participants' words collected at three different points (fall, winter break, and spring) to reveal student perspective changes and evolutions during the first year.

Initial Advising Expectations

Most college academic advisors will never know a student's initial expectations upon entering the first advising session. However, they must gain this understanding as they develop a relationship with each advisee. Data from this study suggest that most students based their expectations on prior experience with guidance received during high school.

During interviews, participants made specific comments and gave examples regarding the circumstances that made prior advising experiences good or bad. Responses were coded as *good*, *bad*, or *neutral*. Students expressed various views on the elements of a good or bad experience, but most supported their beliefs with personal anecdotes. Nine students viewed their advising prior to college as good, 12 were neutral, and 9 considered their prior experiences to be bad.

Students had no qualms about discussing their experiences with guidance counseling in high school. The students' criteria for the sense of satisfaction with their advising experience varied such that in one case a student may express complete satisfaction with an advisor making all the decisions, and in another case, the student, who felt deprived of input, perceived this same type of advising interaction as negative. For example, Jackie believed her high school advisor had been helpful because she "pretty much did everything for us. We just came in, and they would pick out our classes." However, Karl adamantly felt that the advisor in his high school proved more dictatorial than helpful: "I had a really horrible advisor in high school. They did

not take the students' opinions or request into account."

These prior experiences factored into participants' initial expectations of college advisors. Jackie did not feel nervous entering the first advising session, as she was expecting "the advisor to do everything." However, Karl felt a little apprehensive going into his first advising session. Never allowed a part in the decision-making process during prior advising sessions, he expected that "the [college] advisor would just tell me what do whether I like it or not." A college advisor who fails to engage in a meaningful conversation would be unaware that these two students held such different initial expectations about advising.

Most participants reported the expectation of receiving help in selecting future courses. However, the results also show several other initial advisee expectations. For example, 16.5% of fall participants anticipated discussing majors of interest. This relatively low percentage may be explained by Alex, who said he did not feel the need to talk about possible majors: "I really just wanted to get my classes scheduled; I have plenty of time to think about majors." Similar to Alex, in response to questions about her expectations of the first advising session, Keisha replied, "I know I am undecided, but I did not expect to talk about majors and careers during the first meeting."

Several students anticipated that the advisor would try to make them feel comfortable and take a personal interest in them. Carla, who reported in the first interview that she had "nice relationships" with her high school advisors, said: "I wondered if my advisor would go into detail on what classes are about and just make me feel comfortable." Monique held high expectations for her advisor: "I expected the advisor to ease my stress, just show me that they care about me and how I'm doing as a person." These examples from the fall interviews demonstrate that at least some students expect genuine comfort and care during the advising process.

Undecidedness During the First Year

The undecided status of incoming students generates questions for advisors working with each individual: How does this freshman undecided about a major feel about being unsure? Is the advisee undecided because of lack of knowledge about majors or careers or does the person entertain so many possibilities that a decision has become impossible? Does the person receive negative feedback from peers or family members because of an undeclared major? The levels of indecision and concerns about being undecided vary greatly from student to student, but the following two subthemes emerged from this study: reasons for not declaring and concerns intrinsic to the student or based on influence from valued sources.

The institution under study offers over 160 majors, minors, and emphasis areas, a situation that may overwhelm entering freshmen. Almost all participants expressed awareness of possible majors. Twenty-eight of the 30 (93%) fall interview participants claimed to be considering at least one major. For example, Karl indicated consideration of a major but an unwillingness to commit: "I have always enjoyed history. I have had several people tell me that I would be good at teaching, and I agree with them." In addition to a history degree because of his interest in the subject, Karl had extended his thinking to a future career. However, he also expressed concern about foreclosing too soon: "The reason I did not declare it on my application is because I wanted to explore all options before deciding on history." Additionally, 15 of the 30 (50%) students cited interest in two or more majors on campus. Two (7%) students could not name a specific major they were considering.

In the spring semester, 5 participants had either left the university or could not be contacted. Of the 25 remaining, 15 (60%) declared a major or were confident about choosing a specific major. Ten of the 25 (40%), such as Tamara, were mulling over multiple majors. Tamara considered majors in business management or biology as means to help her attain a career: "After college, I want to do humanitarian work, so either of those majors can get me there." With a clear career vision, Tamara did not feel compelled to hurry in declaring a specific major.

In spring, all students listed at least one major under consideration. These findings indicate that participants had not been undecided because of lack of information about possible majors. They had been taking time to make an educated decision or to decide among multiple majors of interest.

Because of the importance of selecting a major, some students without a declared major may express anxiety over indecision (Gordon, 2007), and in fact, a majority of participants in this study mentioned at least one concern related

to undecidedness. Common concerns included taking longer than desired to graduate, fears over never being able to decide on a major, and not taking appropriate classes. Rick acknowledged worries that upon declaration of a major he "would have the right classes." Sara felt some uneasiness because she was the only one among her friends who had not declared a major: "Everyone knows, well they think they know, exactly what they want to do. I'm afraid I'll never figure it out."

However, not all participants viewed selecting a major as a big decision. A few students indicated that as freshmen they lacked concern about a major. Others specifically noted the time to think about possible majors while taking general education requirements. For example, Karl embraced undecidedness as a freshman, viewing the situation as "time to figure out which direction" was best for him. Being undecided also allowed Karl to "get core classes down" before making a firm decision regarding his major.

During the fall, when asked about the messages they received from others about being undecided, equal portions of participants indicated negative (n = 10), neutral or no (n = 9), and positive messages (n = 11). The students in this study valued others' opinions, but most did not let those from others exert undue influence upon them. Participants report hearing messages in a different tone in the spring semester than they had perceived in the fall. Seven students admitted to hearing positive messages, two acknowledged negative messages coming their way. However, the most dramatic difference between fall and spring communiques involved silence: Fourteen students confirmed they were not receiving any messages during the second semester about being undecided.

Advising Experiences Throughout the First Year

Twenty-five of the 30 participants indicated a positive feeling about their first advising experience in the fall, but 10 participants admitted to being nervous or anxious about the first advising session. Jackie acknowledged some apprehension regarding her first session:

> I was kind of nervous that I would get there and not know what to expect. I did not know what I was going to be asked. I'm not sure what I want to major in, so I was kind of nervous.

Advisors should recognize that 30% of participants acknowledged being nervous. They should use this information to better address the first advising meeting with a new student.

Students reported that feelings about their advising session changed slightly from fall to spring. Almost all spring participants related a good second advising session with their academic advisor. Only one student expressed displeasure with his second session. Paul said, "I feel like I am being pushed in a direction." He continued to point out that the advisor "sort of pushed me in the business area and the psychology area instead of primary courses that would count for everything." Several mentioned enjoying discussing with advisors their classes and schedules, learning about campus resources, and reflecting on the first year in college.

In fact, the positive terms used to describe both sessions by the participants comprised the strongest point of similarity between the fall and spring interviews. The only glaring difference between the two sessions involved a lowered state of nervousness and anxiety during the second advising session in the spring. For example Carla had reported feeling "hesitant and anxious" during her fall session, but "knew just what to do" during her second session. This positive attitude may be attributed to her familiarity with the advisor and the advising process.

Students' reported answers when queried in the fall about ways they would prepare for the next session fell into three types: to research possible majors before the next advising session, to research class availability, and to get advised earlier. Clay said, "I'm still undecided so I haven't committed to anything. I'm going to look into a couple of majors before next time [I meet with my advisor]. I'm hoping to be set on a major before my next advising meeting." Most students, in fact, did prepare for their second sessions more than they had done before the first appointment. Twenty-four spring participants reported some proactive behavior to prepare for the spring session. Of the 25 spring participants, 16 said they would research future classes, 6 acknowledged exploring possible majors, and 1 did not have a plan to prepare for sophomore year advising.

Participants in this study thought very highly of advising in higher education. At the conclusion of each interview during the fall and spring semesters, I asked each student to discuss the advising process as a whole. Every student in the

study used positive descriptors while answering the questions. Bernard reported being hesitant about academic advising at first but was grateful for the guidance at the conclusion of the appointment: "Going into it, I was kind of dreading it. I thought it was not really going to help me, but it did. My advisor was really nice and did a good job." Every participant's positive appraisal of the academic advising process reaffirms the efforts toward ensuring student satisfaction. As documented in prior research, a satisfied student is more likely to be retained by the institution (Cuseo, 2003).

Discussion

The results of this study form the basis of five recommendations for advisors who work with first-year undecided students. First, advisors should be aware of students' initial expectations upon entering the first advising session. This study reveals that high school advising experiences shape new college students' preliminary advising expectations. Students' prior experiences will vary, so advisors need to engage each student early in the first session to identify the advisee's initial expectations. If students report good prior experiences, the transition to working with a college advisor will be eased for the first session. However, to develop trust with a student coming from nonideal advising situations, the advisor may need to spend some extra time explaining ways college advising will be different from that received in high school. If a trusting relationship cannot be established early in the advising process, the advisor–advisee partnership will likely not reach full potential. This crucial introductory practice supports Alexitch's (2002) and Yarbrough's (2002) contention that a personal relationship between the academic advisor and the student is important for student satisfaction, academic success, and retention.

Second, advisors cannot assume students' reasons for being undecided. This study revealed numerous explanations for first-year students to be undecided upon entering higher education. Some participants aligned with Bloom, Tripp, and Shaffer's (2011) definition of scanners, who cannot choose just one major and so enter college as undecided. However, other participants could not identify even one major of interest, much less multiple majors, after the first advising session.

Regardless of their reason for being undecided, every participant fell into one of Gordon's (1998) four primary categories for undecided students. However, within the category, the students indicated, through different justifications for indecision, various characteristics of the typology. Therefore, advisors should familiarize themselves with Gordon's work but understand that each student will present with unique needs. For example, three students may be classified as seriously undecided. However, one may fall under this categorization due to lack of awareness of the different major options on campus. Another may enjoy a subject but lacks the self-confidence to declare it as a major. The third student may not know the best fit of major for a postgraduation career. Advisors who understand the different reasons for being undecided and can address individual motives will likely best educate their advisees.

Third, as explained by Gordon (2007) initial concerns about undecidedness may stem from students being "unable, unready, or unwilling to commit themselves to a specific academic direction" (p. 81). Based on findings from this study, student concerns may range from extreme to trivial, but advisors should understand that most will express some trepidation about their undecided status. The manner in which advisors address initial concerns can set the tone for the first advising session and the entire advisor–advisee relationship. Therefore, advisors should inquire about advisee apprehensions in regard to selecting a major early in the first advising sessions. In agreement with Pizzolato's (2006) findings, students may not immediately open up to an advisor. However, throughout the course of an advising session, an advisor can pick up on uneasiness through verbal prompts, body language, and other clues given by the student. Once cognizant of student uneasiness, the advisor should address the troubling issue directly and offer encouragement as needed.

Fourth, students' expectations and investment in the advising partnership will change throughout the first year due to several factors such as familiarity with the advising process, comfort with the advisor, and the students' increased cognitive, psychosocial, and identity development. This study demonstrated that students' initial expectations changed from vague and uncertain to those that encompassed definable outcomes such that the advisor and advisee could work together to ensure that the student meets specified goals.

Furthermore, the value students placed on academic advising increased after the first advising session. Advisors can anticipate that students will generate more specific expectations for future

advising sessions. The fashion in which an advisor responds to changes in the student can influence a student's level of advising satisfaction. If the advisor cannot recognize and meet the advisee's changing expectations, the student will be less likely to seek help from the advisor in the future (Alexitch, 2002).

Fifth, first-year undecided students are transitioning through different levels of development. Their expectations, levels of indecision, concerns about being undecided, and ability to make meaning of their first-year advising experiences are based on their position in the development continuum. Therefore, advisors should be educated on various theories of student development such as Perry's intellectual and ethical development, Chickering's identity development, and Schlossberg's transition theories (see Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998).

An advisor knowledgeable in student development theory can meet students' expectations for their current levels of development and also offer guidance about issues that students may not have anticipated at specific points of their educational journeys. Advisors should participate in continuing education or professional development opportunities regarding college student development. This extra instruction supports Steele's (2003) recommendation that advisors who work with undecided students "need specialized knowledge and skills that require more training than is often provided in a basic advisor-development program" (p. 10). Advisors knowledgeable in student development theory not only increase their value as professionals in the field of academic advising, but they also demonstrate their commitment to student success.

Summary

This phenomenological qualitative case study presents academic advising experiences of first-year undecided students at a university classified by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (n.d.) as having high research activity. It revealed that although first-year undecided students share common elements of undecidedness, they each present individual needs and expectations. Therefore, despite the useful categorization that fits multiple students, academic advising for this population must be specific to the individual student and developmentally appropriate and satisfying. Further exploration of efficient academic advising and its impact on student persistence and graduation can provide even more insight on these important issues.

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Author's Note

Kyle Ellis is the Director of the Center for Student Success and First-Year Experience at The University of Mississippi. In 2009, he attended the inaugural NACADA Research Symposium, where he began the research framework for this dissertation study. His research interests include academic advising, the first-year experience, and student retention. Readers may contact Dr. Ellis at ellis@olemiss.edu.

Appendix A. Interview items presented after a participant's first advising experience

1. How are things going at the university?
2. Discuss your academic advising experience in high school.
3. Who were the primary people giving you academic guidance prior to enrolling at the university?
4. What concerns do you have about being undecided in your major?
5. What messages are you receiving from others about being undecided?
6. Since you have been on campus, what have you learned about majors that suit your strengths and interests?
7. Describe the majors you are considering. What about them appeals to you? What have you heard from others about these majors?
8. How do these majors relate to your ideas about what you want to do after college?
9. Now think about your recent experience with academic advising at the university. What were some of your initial feelings?
10. What are your thoughts on the advisor's location and availability?
11. What were your expectations going into the academic advising session?
12. What occurred during the advising session?
13. What are your immediate impressions after your session? To what extent are the impressions still holding true?
14. Now that you have had your first advising session, how will you prepare for the next?
15. How would you rate the overall effectiveness of your advising experience?
16. Discuss your thoughts on the advising process as a whole.

Appendix B. Interview items presented after a participant's second advising experience

1. How is the spring semester treating you?
2. What concerns do you have about being undecided in your major in the second semester of your first year?
3. What messages are you receiving from others about being undecided?
4. Now that you have experienced college life for a semester and a half, what have you learned about majors that suit your strengths and interests?
5. Describe the majors you are considering now. To what extent have the majors changed from fall to spring?
6. What were your thoughts on the advisor's location and availability?
7. What were your expectations going into the second advising session? How did expectations change from session one to session two?
8. What were your immediate impressions after your second session? What are some of your thoughts now about the value of your second session?
9. Now that you have had two advising sessions, how will you prepare for the next?
10. How would you describe the overall effectiveness or your advising experiences during your first year of college?
11. After a year in college and two advising sessions, how have your advising expectations changed from entering the university to present?
12. What advice would you give to future first-year students regarding academic advising?
13. What could make the advising process as a whole better?