

First-Generation Students With Undecided Majors: A Qualitative Study of University Reacculturation

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When they enter institutions of higher education, students typically leave behind one culture to join another. Despite the higher rates of attrition for first-generation students over continuing-generation students and undecided students over declared students, little research has been focused on undeclared first-generation students. To understand the challenges and experiences of first-generation undecided students transitioning to a new and unfamiliar academic environment, we applied a reacculturation process to this qualitative exploratory case study of 35 students. Data came from interviews, focus group interactions, observations, and written responses to open-ended questions, which were subsequently triangulated. Findings revealed heightened feelings of stress, desire to become comfortable on campus, reliance upon continuing-generation friends, helpfulness of a specialized first-year seminar course, and uncertainty about advisors' roles.

[doi:10.12930/NACADA-16-030]

KEY WORDS: first-generation students, first-year success, reacculturation, transition communities, translators, undecided students

First-generation students present a particular concern to institutions of higher education because their rate of attrition exceeds that of continuing-generation students (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Martinez, Sher, Krull, & Wood, 2009; Padgett, Johnson, & Pascarella, 2012; Swecker, Fifolt, & Searby, 2013). In this study, we define *first-generation college students* as undergraduates with neither parent a graduate from a 4-year institution (Hicks, 2003; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Petty, 2014) because, according to Petty (2014), this definition has been cited the most frequently in the literature. Unlike first-generation students, at least one parent of continuing-generation students graduated from college.

Research has repeatedly indicated that the likelihood of first-generation students to persist (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Martinez et al., 2009; Padgett et al., 2012; Swecker et al., 2013) and withdraw from college during their first year exceeds that of continuing-generation students (Tinto, 2007). First-generation students lack the cultural capital of the university system that they enter, some to the extent of complete unawareness of the existence of a university system culture or the language that they are expected to know (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005; Jenkins, Belanger, Connally, Boals, & Durón, 2013). Cultural capital encompasses “the education and advantages that a person accumulates, which elevates his or her capacity to fit into higher social strata” (Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012, p. 6). Ward et al. (2012) posited that cultural capital is not acquired quickly; rather, it is gained from multiple experiences reinforced by one’s parents.

A study by Barry, Hudley, Kelly, and Cho (2009) revealed that first-generation students experience great stress. Without individuals in their lives (e.g., family) who can directly relate to these taxing experiences, first-generation students may not readily share their college-specific troubles (Jenkins et al., 2013). Although they might gain increased cultural capital from interactions with faculty members and staff, many first-generation students do not readily pursue those interactions (Ward et al., 2012). Infrequent meetings with the faculty and staff may compound feelings of isolation and being the lone person in an unfamiliar situation (Dennis et al., 2005). Having family who may question a student’s decision to attend college can reinforce the feeling of disconnectedness (Cushman, 2007; Schultz, 2004; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). With self-doubt and a desire to belong, many first-generation students express more concern with making friends than mastering academics or joining organizations (Cushman, 2007).

Even as pursuing a college degree presents challenges, advancing toward an unknown college degree complicates the journey to graduation (Cuseo, 2005; Gordon & Steele, 2003). Students undecided about majors have been extensively researched (Cuseo, 2005). Engle and Tinto (2008) found that students in the first two years of college tend to question their (possible) major, and without academic goals or clear sense of purpose (Hagstrom, Skovholt, & Rivers, 1997), some of these undecided students leave higher education institutions without a degree (Allen & Robbins, 2008). Furthermore, Gordon and Steele (2003) conducted a 25-year longitudinal study and learned that 85% of the first-year undecided students in the study were somewhat or very anxious about the major selection process. They reported that approximately one third of the entering first-year students in their study identified as undecided majors, and the approximate one third with declared majors changed their program of study at least once.

Some students select a major on the basis of suggestions from their families or high school guidance counselors (McDaniels, Carter, Heinzen, Candri, & Wieberg, 1994; Workman, 2015a). Others may benefit from those college advisors who receive extra training or professional development to work with undecided students on academic major selection (Workman, 2015a, 2015b). However, feelings of doubt might be reinforced for those students attending one of the approximately 50% of colleges requiring or highly recommending first-year students declare a major within the first year (Cuseo, 2005).

Multiple reasons explain the reasons students remain undecided: They are completely overwhelmed with the many options; they want to explore fully all the areas that interest them before declaring; they have narrowed their choice to a few options; or they may question whether college offers the best experiences for them to reach their goals (Cuseo, 2005). Students need to understand that a selected major does not mean that they can never change their career.

Cuseo (2005) found that “final decisions about majors and careers do *not* occur *before* students enter college; rather, students make these decisions *during* the college experience” (p. 6). According to Upcraft, Gardner, and Barefoot (2005), students need to feel success during their first year, and for some students, selecting an academic major might offer the necessary sense of accomplishment.

Research indicated that students who select a major according to their interests, abilities, and

skills are more likely to persist than students who arbitrarily select a major (Allen & Robbins, 2008); therefore, students need the option to remain undecided until they have considered their choices. Although students’ interests and skills may indicate the majors to which they are best suited, performance on standardized exams does not seem to predict the major a student will choose. A research study involving 87,993 first-time students attending twenty 4-year institutions of higher education revealed that students’ SAT scores did not indicate their selected majors (Allen & Robbins, 2008). Nevertheless, the study showed the connection among student persistence, academic success, and major selection. Requiring students to meet with an advisor might help ensure that students learn different methods to explore a major (Cuseo, 2005).

Understanding the major selection process does not provide answers to all the career- and life-related questions that can create stumbling blocks for students, especially for those of first-generation status (Hagstrom et al., 1997). Although selecting a major overcomes one hurdle, other stumbling blocks, such as possible internships, relevant student organizations, and networking advice, remain. Engle and Tinto (2008) reported a small difference between first-generation and continuing-generation students’ declarations of undecided majors (30 and 33% respectively). Chen and Carroll (2005) claimed that first-generation students have more difficulty than continuing-generation students in selecting a major, but they did not disclose any percentages.

The struggle to decide a major, despite the academic advising available to assist with the process, is exacerbated by a poorly formed foundational knowledge about college culture. First-generation students, who may not have experienced many informed family conversations about selecting a major, enter college with few ideas about ways to begin the process of choosing a program of study or appreciating the role of advising during the progression of major selection. Feelings of isolation and doubt may increase for first-generation students who have entered an unknown collegiate environment only to find that, unlike their continuing-generation friends who have declared their major, they do not have a major department that serves as their academic home (Cuseo, 2005). When both variables, first-generation and undecided, are combined, students may experience even greater difficulty in connecting to the institution than students who identify as

either first generation or undecided; thus, they may face a higher likelihood of attrition than their continuing-generation or decided peers. First-generation undecided students make up a significant percentage of students every year at some institutions; therefore, advisors and administrators must understand their challenges.

Conceptual Framework

When they enter institutions of higher education, students typically leave behind one culture to join another one in a process that Bruffee (1999) termed *reacculturation*: “switching membership from one culture to another” (p. 298). Bruffee (1995) also described the process as “modifying or renegotiating our participation in the language, values, knowledge, and mores of the communities we come from, as well as becoming fluent in those same elements of the communities we are trying to join” (p. 14). Students who mastered their high school culture may enter college facing an entirely new environment filled with knowledge, information, and a language that they have not yet learned (Bruffee, 1995).

Social constructionists, such as Bruffee, view knowledge as being created from one individual conversing with another. Bartholomae (1985) posited that students receiving access to the higher education community should expect to engage in a higher level of discourse than they had practiced in their pre-collegiate culture. Essentially, according to Bartholomae (1985), a student “must learn to speak our language. Or he must dare to speak it or to carry off the bluff, since speaking and writing will most certainly be required long before the skill is ‘learned’” (p. 135). With little to no transition from secondary school or the workplace to university culture and expectations, students must acclimate quickly (Bartholomae, 1985; Bruffee, 1995). Continuing-generation students are presumably advantaged over first-generation students by their proximity to college-educated parents who speak the university language. Students who take the position of Bartholomae (1985) and select a major engage in a specific language, that of their intended discipline; that is, they are learning to speak in a type of language to which undecided majors have neither been exposed nor have learned.

Freire (2000) argued that the reacculturation process cannot be successfully completed without the actions of and conversations with others. Likewise, Bruffee (1995) explained that reacculturation involves an extremely challenging process, never fully completed, and even harder to do alone:

“We move from group to group best in a group” (p. 14). To assist with reacculturation, students may form *transition communities* (Bruffee, 1995, 1999) in which, as described by Bruffee (1995), “People construct knowledge as they talk together and reach consensus” (p. 14). These transition communities are composed of people also undergoing the reacculturation process, such as an incoming class of first-generation students learning to speak the language of the university. Yet, for students who are undecided, their discipline-specific language remains unidentified, which only intensifies the importance of the transition community. Beginning with a small number of students, these transition communities will, as the level of trust increases, begin to merge with other transition communities with members who have also increased the trust placed in each other (Bruffee, 1999).

Transition communities offer important support as students strive to join *knowledge communities* at the university in which they learn the language of their new culture. As Bruffee (1999) exhorted, “Mastery of a knowledge community’s normal discourse is the basic qualification for acceptance into that community” (p. 643). Therefore, those not fluent in this new language do not attain membership (Bruffee, 1999). For those students who successfully gain membership, this newly acquired language becomes the normal or standard discourse of the knowledge community. As Bruffee (1999) explained, “When we *speak the same language*, normal discourse is the language we speak” (p. 296 [emphasis added]). Foucault (1972), too, spoke of discourse as a “group of rules that are immanent in a practice, and define it in its specificity” (p. 46). Bruffee (1999) argued that *translators* “help students acquire fluency in the language of those communities” (p. 154).

Compared to their first-generation peers, continuing-generation students may join the university membership with relative ease because their parents serve as translators. Likewise, students with decided majors and thus a home department, benefit from the established members who act as translators and facilitators to the knowledge community. The question remains: For first-generation undecided majors, who translates this new language of college?

The Bruffee (1995, 1999) reacculturation process serves as a guide to view the experiences of first-generation undecided students as they enter college. With limited access to university translators, first-generation undecided students, like all

undergraduates, must switch memberships as seamlessly as possible. Through this study, we sought to gain a clearer understanding of the unique reacculturation experiences of first-generation undecided students as they transition to the knowledge community at the university.

Research Questions

To advance the understanding of the university transition for first-generation undecided students, we created the following research questions:

- RQ1.** How do first-generation undecided students reacculturate to the unknown academic environment of a university?
- RQ2.** How do first-generation undecided students gain access to a university's culture?
- RQ3.** How do first-generation undecided students select translators within a university?
- RQ4.** How do first-generation undecided students form transition communities within a university?
- RQ5.** How do first-generation undecided students use academic advisors as translators?

Methods

We conducted this study at a large, public, master's degree level, comprehensive, residential, selective-admissions institution in the Midwest. Utilizing a qualitative, exploratory study, we selected a constructivist approach because it allows for meaning to be shaped by seeking a greater understanding of the world (Creswell, 2014) and complements the reacculturation framework we used to construct meaning. Institutional data showed a 3-year pattern in which first-generation undecided students had a lower retention rate than continuing-generation declared students by 10–20%. Thirty-five first-generation undecided freshmen were selected using purposeful sampling (per Merriam, 2009). Criteria for selection included status as undecided academic major, first-generation, traditional aged, full-time degree seeking, and not a member of the Honors College. Of the 35 participants, 6 self-identified as male and 29 self-identified as female; all self-identified as first-generation college students. Participants attended high schools within rural and urban counties.

Because we did not focus upon the intersectionality of low income or underrepresented populations, students were not asked demographic questions related to socioeconomic status, race, or ethnicity.

To support validity and reliability, we triangulated data by utilizing different data-collection methods, including 9 observations of advising interactions, 1 focus group, 14 interviews, 21-item open-ended questionnaire with written response, 1 practitioner log, and field notes. The team member (Glaessgen) observing the advising interactions maintained limited interaction with the participants. After introducing herself to the student, she sat apart on the advisor's side of the space during the advising appointments. She took field notes or jottings (per Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011) on an observatory protocol sheet, which included headings for questions the student asked, conversation topics, length of the advising appointment, subtle factors observed, and a sketch of the room. Jottings are described as “a brief written record of events and impressions captured in key words and phrases” (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 29) that are then transposed into finely detailed field notes containing thick descriptions (Emerson et al., 2011).

According to the literature review and an expert panel's review, we assured alignment of purpose and Bruffee's (1995, 1999) reacculturation framework by developing an 8-item open-ended questionnaire that asked first-generation undecided student respondents to reflect upon their college experiences. Examples of items included, “How do you feel about being the first person in your family to attend college?” “How has being an undecided student affected your college experience?” “Describe your relationship with your academic advisor” and “What support do you still need as a college student?” Because she was teaching a section of the mandatory freshman seminar designed and available, by choice, for first-generation with undeclared majors, the questionnaire-developer maintained a practitioner's log in which she captured observations, conversations, and experiences.

The same team member who created the questionnaire conducted the focus group and interviews; each of which ranged between 30 and 60 minutes. During the focus group and interviews, a semi-structured interview protocol, which allowed for probing questions (per Merriam, 2009), was used. Follow-up probing questions were asked to enrich the descriptions provided by the participants (per Creswell, 2013). This semi-structured

interview protocol was informed by the literature review and Bruffee's (1995, 1999) reacculturation process and then reviewed by an expert panel. The protocol included 1 introductory and 1 transition item followed by 10 key items and 1 wrap-up item (per Krueger & Casey, 2009). The introductory item focused on the current semester in general, and the transition item was used to inquire about the selection of the chosen university. The 10 key items included 1 focused on the role of siblings, and if the student had siblings, inquiries were directed to information on the college attendance and program of study for the sibling(s). One item addressed the student's experience attending college as a child of parents who had not experienced college. One item was used to inquire into any obstacles the student faced. Two items were asked to explore the student's undecided status. Three questions were asked specifically about the student's relationships with assigned academic advisors, including the advisor's role in the student's college transition and major selection process. The last two items addressed helpful resources and the additional support the student needed. During the wrap-up, the student was encouraged to share additional information about the college experience.

The semi-structured interview protocol was created based upon two primary factors: (a) The interviewer's previous experience as an academic advisor provided insider knowledge of traditional student transition issues and (b) the selected reacculturation framework. An expert panel was used to assure that the alignment of items was shaped by the purpose and conceptual framework of the study. Use of preexisting or a priori coding (per Creswell, 2013; Saldaña, 2016) meant that the findings aligned with the selected framework used to organize data into broad categories as determined by the research questions. In vivo coding (per Saldaña, 2016) provides a richness to the findings because the codes "honor[ed] the participant's voice" (p. 106) and is "applicable to action and practitioner research" (p. 106). The goal was to capture the students' voices for use in garnering additional support and awareness for first-generation undecided students. We include samples of student expressions to support the findings.

Findings

Through data collection analysis, themes were found congruent with the reacculturation framework. We organized the findings using the research questions as a guide. Therefore, we first describe

the reacculturation experiences and ways to access the university's culture. Then, we share the findings on student experiences of selecting translators, forming transition communities, and using academic advisors as translators. Furthermore, the poignancy of the reacculturation experience is presented by utilizing the participants' voices, which were attributed with pseudonyms.

Reacculturating to the Unknown Academic Environment

During the 14 interviews, the word *stressed* appeared 98 times with 19 instances explicitly related to undecided status and 15 instances explicitly related to first-generation status; 10 of 14 interviewees specifically mentioned feeling stressed about their first-generation and undecided status. Nine of 21 student writings in response to the questionnaire indicated feelings of stress related to being the first member of the family to attend college or gaining an increasing awareness that they needed to decide their academic major; some suggested that both the status of undecided and first generation created apprehension. In addition, 2 of 5 focus group participants mentioned feeling some sort of stress or anxiety. Likewise, 6 of 9 advising observations revealed similar indications of stress or anxiety from those students.

"I do it on my own." As they wrestled through their Free Application for Financial Student Aid (FAFSA), first-generation undecided students experienced the first indicators that their parents' roles as translators (Bruffee, 1995, 1999) may have ceased. In 13 of 14 interviews, students mentioned a high level of stress involved as they worked on the FAFSA. Stephanie explained,

My mom would [help] if she could. . . . Since they haven't done it, they don't know what to do. It's not like my mom wouldn't want to help me, but she doesn't know anything. She tried with what she could, but she didn't even know how to complete the FAFSA. . . . Last semester was very stressful having to deal with the loans, but I am getting the hang of it. I do it on my own. (Interview)

Similarly, the college application process, including ACT registration, was "a foreign concept to do as my parents had no idea. Now they have a better grip on things, but it just takes experience"

(interview). Students were expected to know their academic focus through the next four years, starting with the completion of their college application.

“You are behind before things even get started.” Conversations with their parents, particularly about course work and internships, simply did not happen for many first-generation undecided students. In addition, the students expressed a growing realization that the allotted time to select a major was dwindling. In fact, 4 of the 9 advising observations documented some discussion of major selection. Before they had even started their collegiate career, first-generation undecided students had shown no awareness that they needed to select a major, and they understood that their parents did not inform them about the process. Rianna shared:

Because at first you are a first-generation college student, and your parents didn’t go to college, so . . . your literacy rate is a little different. And then if you are undecided, then that is one more thing that is dragging you down. You are behind before things even started. As a first-generation college student, you keep asking yourself: What are you going to do? But you can’t go to your parents about it because they have no idea what you are even doing in college. (Interview)

Being undecided can make an impact on students’ daily college experiences and escalate the stress level. Some students admitted to thinking about their possible major “every single day” (Ashley, interview).

“What’s your major?” In addressing the popular icebreaker, “What’s your major?” Macy wrote in a questionnaire response: “One of the first questions new people ask is, ‘What are you majoring in?’ I always have to say ‘I am undecided.’ Explaining I do not know what I want to do with my life has not been easy.” The question is routinely asked of college students, as 10 of 14 students interviewed indicated, and serves as a burdensome reminder of not knowing. In response to the open-ended questions, Bethany wrote:

Undecided. That’s my major, my burden, my least favorite topic to discuss. The truth is, I have not known what I wanted to do with my life since third grade when I decided I did not have a knack for interior design. I have

wracked my brain for hours on end, and I always come up empty handed. When people ask me this question it stresses me out.

The impact of this icebreaker question on the levels of concern, frustration, and stress of first-generation undecided students can vary. Thomas lamented:

For a while, I was timid about saying I was undecided, and then I decided I was going to say it loudly and confidently, and now I don’t have the energy to keep saying it anymore. The last time I went to [a coffee house] I was asked, “What’s your major?” by the counter person. (Interview)

Multiple students made similar comments about their families repeatedly asking about their major selection process: “The only thing about being undecided is every time you see your family they ask if you have decided yet” (Regina). Students’ responses to their first-generation undecided status were heartfelt, as Thomas ardently expressed in an interview: “Because you don’t have family who can reciprocate those feelings, those stresses. You can say that you are really stressed about not having a major, but who knows what that feels like?”

Whether in the form of college or financial aid applications, students experienced some level of stress before the first day of college. For many students, completing the FAFSA was their first indication that college life would present surprising challenges. Checking *undecided* on any formal document that asks for indication of academic major, such as the college application, signals lack of certainty that continued to confront their sensibilities each time someone asked them about their major selection status.

Gaining Access to the University Culture

First-generation undecided students intuitively realized that the collegiate environment would differ from high school. The desire to maintain some sense of familiarity while experiencing an unknown culture was a shared phenomenon among the participants of the study. By achieving a comfortable living environment, making new friends, and participating in Welcome Weekend, students reported gaining access to the university culture.

In a meaningful finding, 15 of 35 students mentioned *comfy* and *comfortable* when recalling their first days on campus. The literature showed the importance of making this unique environment as ordinary as quickly possible (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Ward et al., 2012). Claiming their space and filling it with artifacts that remind them of the familiar life they left behind, 9 interviewed students and 6 students in written responses to the open-ended items mentioned the value of connecting to home.

Describing safety in numbers, 10 students revealed that they had latched onto either high school friends, who were now roommates, or to other residence hall students during the weekend before classes started. Participants told of leaving their residence-hall room open in hopes that other students would enter and might sojourn into the unknown with them. The desire to feel *comfy* quickly went beyond the residence halls. Students shared the need to locate their classrooms before the semester classes started. Furthermore, students looked for friendly and approachable faces in their classes. They reported feeling a sense of accomplishment and pride when they felt sufficiently comfortable to embark on the search for classroom locations alone.

All 14 students interviewed indicated that they had participated in Welcome Weekend the weekend prior to classes and found it had been helpful in gaining access to university culture. Usually with their roommate or high school friend, students attended the fun festivities with one purpose—to meet new people. First-generation undecided students gained access by initially making their new environment comfortable and then continuing to step outside their comfort zones to meet new people.

Selecting University Translators

First-generation undecided students needed to reacclerate quickly to the unknown aspects of the university. The routine habit of asking their families for assistance had simultaneously come to a close as the door to college opened. As a result, first-generation undecided students relied upon different translators, who included roommates, self, and instructors.

“The most crucial piece of home . . . turned out to be my roommate.” Seven of 35 students said that their roommate served as their translator, and in all 7 instances, the roommate was either a sophomore or a continuing-generation student. Because of accessibility and the comforting

reassurance they offered, students indicated that, when they had questions, they asked their roommates. Conversely, several students who had first-generation roommates expressed that “it’s kinda nice knowing that my roommate feels stressed, too” (Interview) because it helped to validate their own feelings of uncertainty and anxiety. However, some reported reluctance in asking their roommates questions because they did not want to increase the roommate’s anxiety if they too did not know the answer.

“Just kinda figuring everything out on my own.” Because they navigated their way through the FAFSA and college application processes with limited parental guidance, perhaps first-generation students become resourceful and more observant than before they matriculated into college. For example, Sam shared that he read the university bulletin boards to learn campus information. Likewise, Bethany honed her observation skills during the first few weeks, by “just kinda figuring everything out on my own. I think of myself as someone who sits back and listens rather than speak, so I like to observe” (Interview). In fact, the ability to figure out the answer by researching or by observing other students was a common attribute shared by approximately one half of the students interviewed, and it was documented in one third of the observations.

“A teacher’s help is great.” The most useful resource was the first-year seminar, which was mentioned 26 times in the interviews, focus group, and written responses to the questionnaire. One first-year seminar section was designated for first-generation undecided students and was taught by one member of our team (Glaessgen), who subsequently interviewed some of these seminar participants and shared their written responses. The students in this study reported that their seminar assignment to interview an instructor was overwhelmingly helpful. Because talking to an instructor can be a daunting new experience, students found it, perhaps ironically, helpful that such an interview was required so they felt compelled to do it despite any aversion to it. Many students shared that if the interview had not been required, then they would not have sought out a meeting with an instructor. John shared,

This class has taught me that teachers actually do care about you. . . . This helped me get through my public speaking class when we had that instructor interview. After that interview, I met with my teacher at least

three more times. A teacher's help is great. I probably would not have spoken to my public speaking teacher without that assignment. (Written)

In summation, first-generation undecided students learned to rely on translators, other than their parents, to help them through the reacculturation process. Some students lived with other students who had already reacculturated and had either sophomore or continuing-generation status. Upon becoming accustomed to finding their own information, students' sense of self-reliance was heightened. Finally, feeling compelled to reach out to make contact with their instructors proved helpful such that the repeated interactions presumably helped them learn the language of the university.

Forming Transition Communities

Although students understood the importance of getting involved to connect to the university, they did not know the best way to make contact. With their friends and encouraged by the first-year seminar course, many students formed transition communities, which offset some stress, as they reacculturated. Some students participated in university-sanctioned organizations, but an equivalent number did not.

"I could cling to her [best friend]." Making friends served as an initial transition community that also included friends who had college-experienced parents. In all 14 interviews, students emphasized that they were extremely concerned about making friends. In particular, students who lived their entire lives knowing everyone in their town expressed doubts about the process of making friends. Furthermore, students who described themselves as shy and encircled by many people in a strange place felt overwhelmed at times because they were torn between wanting to meet people and wanting to stay in their safe residence hall room. As 19 of 21 students' written questionnaire responses or interviews revealed, friends also served as a means for gathering information; Ashley shared in the interview, "I could cling to her [best friend]."

"And I knew that I was normal." Fifteen of 21 students in the specialized first-year seminar section volunteered that they were helped knowing that other students felt similarly, which they discovered as part of the transition community that was exploring university life with all of the unknowns. In her written questionnaire response,

Regina reflected that, upon matriculation and thinking her case unusual, she had thought a class dedicated for first-generation undecided students would not serve many students. She was relieved upon seeing an entire class filled with other first-generation undecided students and mused, "When I walked into GEP, I saw a lot of students, and I knew that I was normal."

"I needed a community of people to walk through college with." Once initial friendships were made, students turned their attention to expanding their circle of friends. Joining a sorority or fraternity created an instant way to meet people and make new connections, as Jennifer explained in writing, "I needed a community of people to walk through college with. I had my high school friends, but I wanted to branch out and meet more people. So, I joined a sorority." In interviews or in response to the questionnaire, 5 of the 18 women had joined a sorority and described a strong bond with their sorority sisters. However, 2 women indicated that joining a sorority may have prevented them from making friends outside of this self-declared social group. Three male students did not join a fraternity, and their reasoning was captured by John in the interview: "I was not into joining a fraternity, and in my opinion, I thought it was like I was paying for my friends. I know some people join one, but it's definitely not for me."

"It's easier to feel stupid with other people."

The automatic friend group formed as a byproduct of joining an organized university group can reassure both students and their families. Three of 21 students were members of either band or an athletic team, so in addition to moving on campus one week early, they had an organized group already preestablished that included all academic levels, from freshmen to seniors. Both women in band (Cassidy and Mackenzie) commented in separate interviews, but in similar words, "It's easier to feel stupid with other people." Four of the 21 students joined a university-sanctioned organization upon arrival to campus.

"I didn't join any clubs this year, and I really regret that." Whether from not knowing ways to get involved or prioritizing academic priorities, 9 of 21 students did not disclose participation in university-sanctioned organizations their first semester. Even those who chose not to engage acknowledged the benefit and importance of widening their circle of friends. Sam wrote: "I didn't join any clubs this year, and I really regret that. I should have got myself more involved but

focusing on my grades was a little more important.”

In summary, students created friendships as the primary form of transition communities. By sharing first-generation and undecided status, students indicated the specialized first-year seminar served as a valuable transition community. In smaller numbers, students formed transition communities by joining university-sanctioned organizations, including sororities and clubs, but an almost equivalent number of students did not join university organizations.

Using Academic Advisors as Translators

All students with fewer than 75 credit hours are required to meet with an advisor for a registration release. As established employees, advisors have insider status (Drake & Heath, 2011) and can serve as translators. However, many first-generation undecided students do not know the roles of an academic advisor and are unsure of ways to utilize academic advisors beyond course registration assistance (Varney, 2013). Hence, students tend to ask other individuals and explore the university web site to find answers.

“I knew it [academic advising role] was like a high school counselor.” Before they ascertain ways an advisor can help navigate their academic journey, students need to understand the complete role of an advisor. Of 11 students who were asked in the interview if they understood an advisor’s role, only one student, Ashley, indicated “yes.” When probed to describe the advisor’s role, she seemed less certain and equated it to a high school counselor: “I actually did know about an advisor from the older friends who go here. I knew it was like a high school counselor. I pretty much knew, but I am not for certain now.” Other students knew that they were assigned an advisor but did not comprehend the reason.

Approximately one half of the students indicated they were unsure about topics of conversations with an advisor. In a questionnaire response, Cassidy wrote, “He’s a very nice man, . . . but, I don’t really know what I would talk to him about besides classes.” Furthermore, many students indicated they had not spoken to their advisors about study skills or career interests, only class selection. Summer reported sharing her hesitancy toward a possible major with her advisor and felt even more confused:

I told my advisor I was second guessing my major, and he didn’t really know what to say to me. I felt lost. If he doesn’t know what I should do, and I don’t know what I should do, then it is hard. (Interview)

Other students felt frustrated when they met with an advisor who only shared information from the web site. In the focus group, Izaac indicated, “She just tells me stuff that I can look up. I don’t think it has been that helpful or that I needed it.”

“And then eventually, if I was clueless, I might ask my advisor.” Eighteen of 19 students in interviews or focus groups indicated “no” when asked, “Did your academic advisor assist you with your transition to the university?” One student mentioned she had seen her advisor several times for selecting classes and troubleshooting academic weaknesses. The other 18 students had only met with their assigned advisor for the required visit at which time the advisor signs off on the classes for the next semester. In nearly every instance, students described their advising visit much like Sam did in the interview: “I feel like my advisor didn’t ask me if I was struggling or needed help with anything. It was just talking about classes. Like a class registration, but nothing beyond that.” In an equally common response, students indicated that their academic advisor was not the first, second, or even third choice from whom they would seek information. In the interview, Thomas explained, “I probably start with my roommate. If I still have the question, I will probably turn to my other friends, and then eventually, if I was clueless, I might ask my advisor.”

Not until students were specifically asked about their advising experience was an advisor mentioned. Ironically, most students described their academic advisor as *nice*, *friendly*, or *sweet*; no student described their advisor as intimidating or unapproachable. Furthermore, several students recalled their advisor sending an e-mail after midterms either to congratulate them upon their grades or to direct them to appropriate campus resources.

“If you are the only person holding you accountable, it doesn’t work.” Paradoxically, students seemed to want a relationship with their advisors but did not know how to initiate it or the expectations from it. Students appeared to have gleaned that advising is useful, but they did not seek additional appointments or discuss topics other than scheduling classes. The written questionnaire responses and interview conversations

corroborated all 9 advising observations: Students asked only the question that prompted their appointment. Despite the advisor asking if the student had any other questions, the student did not ask additional questions. Thomas recounted his advising appointment:

Part of it is not knowing what questions to ask. . . . It's becoming an adult, and you are becoming more responsible, but it helps if you have somebody holding you accountable. If you are the only person holding you accountable, it doesn't work—you are going to slip. Maybe it would be good if first-generation students were required to meet with their advisor more than one time during the semester. If I had to do it, I would have done it. I think people like me could really use an advisor holding us accountable. (Interview)

Perhaps because they did not grasp the role of an advisor, first-generation undecided students did not seek advising help. Uncertainty about the topics to broach and the conversations to start prevented students from realizing the assistance an academic advisor could provide. Following a common misperception, many students equated an advising session to a simple course registration release.

Discussion

This study adds to the current research about the level of stress that first-generation students experience, particularly because their stress could not be allayed by their families unfamiliar with financial aid and college application processes. However, unlike those described in other first-generation student research, the students in this study were entering with an unknown academic direction as well as into a new environment. To complicate the level of stress further, first-generation undecided students felt the constant pressure of being reminded by practically everyone they encountered about their lack of an academic major, and family members were not able to provide direction. As Gordon and Steele (2003) found, some students become so preoccupied that they think daily about the need to select a major. According to Cuseo (2005), students, first generation or not, find the inability to discuss their major selection options and the complications with their family life frustrating and stressful.

In our study, first-generation undecided students described their experience as stressful because their environment no longer included their familiar translators. Throughout their previous academic career, students had the security of their families to help address issues and questions. Students reacculturating to the unknown environment, one filled with college applications, financial aid paperwork, and major selection, were marking a new journey with an overall initial unawareness of the university system. Students developed their sense of self-reliance as they quickly learned that the culture differed from that of high school; in addition, some students felt the burden easier to bear when the unknown was shared with others. During their reacculturation experience, first-generation undecided students in this study utilized the resources found within their transition communities but did not find or respond to their university translator: academic advisors (Bruffee, 1995, 1999). Although students understood that they were assigned an academic advisor who would assist with future course registration, their lack of understanding of the advisor's role led to discussions focused only upon courses. As a consequence, students tended to ask other individuals, including their roommates and friends, to find answers to their questions; however, their information-gathering strategy that excluded academic advisors in favor of nontrained peers may have led to erroneous information or an inaccurate interpretation of policy.

Implications for Practice and Future Research

The research revealed the experiences and challenges of first-generation students as they enter higher education undecided on an academic major. The findings are significant because they are based on an underexplored population and because of the selected framework, Bruffee's (1995, 1999) reacculturation. Despite the work of previous researchers who looked at either first-generation or undecided students, we examined the intersectionality of both first-generation and undecidedness and the impact of this combined characterization on students' college acculturation. The three-year institutional data revealed a higher attrition rate for first-generation undecided students than for continuing-generation declared students. This finding underscores the importance of understanding the reacculturation experiences and may encourage advisors to provide targeted, intentional support to increase student retention.

The reacculturation framework provided a new vocabulary for those in universities to understand better the support that first-generation undecided students need. For instance, a minor reframing of the popular icebreaker question from “What’s your major?” to “What’s your area of academic interest?” may free students to name any particular subject without disclosing an official undecided status or qualify the response.

Because first-generation undecided students tend to rely upon their initial transition community as they reacculturate, academic advisors might assist in expanding these transition communities (Bruffee, 1995, 1999). A proactive advising approach might assist students in learning about the university and resources available (Varney, 2013). Academic advisors should encourage students’ early involvement in university-sanctioned organizations not only to increase their level of engagement but also their access to knowledge communities (Bruffee, 1995, 1999). Even arranging a panel for students to share the ways they became involved in the university and found their major might engage others who feel unconnected. Moreover, academic advisors must explain their role as early as possible in their interactions, so students view them, as Bruffee (1999) suggests, as university translators and not solely as course-registration assistants.

Because many first-generation college students lack the cultural capital that serves as a basis for asking questions, advisors might provide a frequently-asked-questions list to initiate much-needed conversation. In addition, advisors can create their own checklist of closed-ended, leading questions as a way of probing and possibly uncovering issues that students may not openly share, especially in the presence of a college representative whose role they may not understand or appreciate. As a way to serve as students’ university translators, advisors need to choose their communication style and topics intentionally by using language typical to the culture students already know. For example, advisors might explain the similarities and differences between advisors and high school counselors.

Furthermore, advisors may push for policies to increase the number of required visits of students so that advisors can demonstrate and explain academic major selection resources and help students process their thoughts. First-generation students’ families, by definition, do not have the direct experience to be the sole guides on matters

of the curriculum or campus life. Encouraging students to journal about their major exploration process may help advisors glean insight to make recommendations that help students gain access to their selected knowledge communities. Advisors can also provide opportunities, or explain ways, for students to participate in career assessment inventories to explore their interests and help arrange for follow-up career advising.

Ultimately, first-generation students undecided about their academic major need intentional and deliberate action plans to show the possible paths to their evolving goals. Although the reacculturation process may allow them to grapple with understanding the who, what, when, where, and why of the university system, first-generation students require more time to learn the answer to questions of *how*: *How* do I become involved? *How* do I explore a major? *How* do I study for exams? *How* do I develop an advising relationship? Advisors, by serving as students’ university translators, provide the information on process that answer questions of how.

This study focused upon the reacculturation (Bruffee, 1995, 1999) experiences of first-generation, undecided students; however, other related characteristics can be explored that would augment the area of study or enhance the findings. For instance, we did not look at the intersectionality of low-income or minority status, which is commonly associated with first-generation students. Targeted research and well-informed support services might improve the retention of students known to be at relatively high risk of attrition.

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