

EXPLORING THE UNCERTAIN BUT HOPEFUL FUTURE

Either directly or indirectly most of the contributions to Volume 9, Number 1, of the NACADA *Journal* address the topic of undecided students: who they are, what they expect, and how to assist them. Not surprisingly, some of the authors' findings, conclusions, and suggestions differ from and even contradict others. These disagreements actually are quite encouraging, because they indicate vital dialogue and energetic debate. Their existence illustrates how we, as academic advisors, have assumed an authoritative role to speak on issues critical to higher education and quite legitimately have presumed to offer potential solutions.

In the last three issues of the *Journal*, Dr. Wall gave us historical insight into attitudes toward undecided students. Prior to the **mid-1960s**, colleges and universities simply ignored their presence or provided them with minimal guidance. Where available, assistance often came in the form of psychological counseling, which saw the "problem" as one of personal adjustment. Although **this** attitude still persists among some colleagues in higher education, it fortunately grows more isolated. We have made progress. Extreme circumstances excepted, we do not send the puzzled new student or the **searching**, bewildered advanced student home until he or she "grows up." (Our returning adults are already grown up.)

We recognize that indecision has multiple layers, caused by the pressures of society and the complexity of our institutions. We know that only a small number of our students need therapy in relation to their choice of an appropriate major. For the most part we currently regard indecision as the rule. The student who arrives on our campus having researched and chosen a specific major and who follows the plan from matriculation through graduation represents the exception. One public, research-oriented university for the past decade has found that 79 percent of its freshmen label themselves as undecided about a program of study. When asked to select a major unofficially, less than 15 percent of these freshmen indicate knowledge and experience with the area chosen. Many of us in advising, supported by long experience and the literature, could confidently estimate that similar descriptive statistics regarding indecision, albeit not as extreme, would hold true across the nation, regardless of institutional size, mission, or population.

Perhaps the time has arrived for us, as academic advisors, or for NACADA itself, to state more formally or substantively that the majority of entering students — traditional or non-traditional — are somehow in an undecided mode. Many of us already, in our daily activities or the way we direct advising centers, make this assumption. Nevertheless, we certainly **could** work more efficiently and with fewer institutional obstacles if our administrators were to function with this mind-set in regard to policy-making and resource allocation. Although such an attitude towards students might represent a significant philosophical change in many of our colleges and universities, it is a worthy ideal toward which we in academic advising can work. We, after all, are the experts, we conduct the studies, we have the experience. Of course, considering the deeply rooted conservative nature of academe and its administrators, **this** shift in thinking will require considerable effort and time.

Meanwhile, we might effect a significant change that lies squarely within our domain both for the present and for the immediate future. As a unified group we could decide to eliminate the term "undecided" from our advising vocabulary, because the word so easily identifies with indecisive and carries burdensome connotations. Articles in this issue, and all issues of the *Journal* for that matter, suggest that indecision has varied levels and forms demanding differing and often individualized approaches. Rather than throwing students into an "undecided" category, would they, we, and our institutions be better served by the term "exploratory?"

New students might need information about **themselves** in relation to the content and expectations of a wide range of academic programs. More advanced students, who originally considered themselves as decided and who are denied entrance to controlled majors, for whatever reason, might face the sudden and unexpected necessity of finding acceptable alternatives. Students with interests and abilities in less professionally oriented majors might need assistance with self-confidence, life **and/or** career planning. The list of situations can be as long as any advisor's daily appointment calendar, but all of these students are, in fact, exploring the possibilities open to them or the choices that remain to them. They come to us for help because they are uncertain about the best direction to take, and they look to us for objective observation, guidance, and information.

The shift from "undecided" to "exploratory" might appear as subtle word play, but it would reach the core of our vision of students and would enable them to see that vision for themselves. We all know that a society focused on **the** future is a society with hope, and if our institutions and our students can engage the higher education experience as one of exploration, as one of finding as much certainty as humanly possible in an uncertain world, our mutual task **will** take on a more forward-looking focus. When you stop to reflect on our role in academe, you can come to the conclusion that we have been given a very nice way to earn a living. Much of the academic advising activity involves encouraging students to explore a rather uncertain future with a reasonable sense of hope, so why not shape our means of expression to fit the reality?