

Abstract

Student retention is a persistent dilemma in higher education because it is how student success is measured. Universities invest resources in retaining vulnerable populations and providing additional support measures because they are most at risk of dropping out. The premise of this study is that students who enter college without a major are considered vulnerable, as they are highly prone to drop out. Numerous studies have found that entering college with an "unknown/undecided" status negatively impacts retention, well-being, and motivation due to a lack of clearly defined educational goals. However, students and families often lack adequate information about the importance of declaring before entering college, as well as the costs, difficulties, and benefits of each major. A university education will likely be one of the student's largest financial endeavors. Families put much effort into *where* to send their child and *how* to pay for it without giving as much attention to *why* they are going to college in the first place. Starting college without a plan has grave financial and motivational consequences. Finding the right fit major is a proactive and intentional process; therefore, early intervention for undecided students is critical.

Research Questions

Multiple studies suggest that entering college with an undecided declaration negatively impacts student's well-being, motivation, and retention. The purpose of this study is to determine whether pre-major coaching with the inclusion of motivational interviewing, which is a solution-focused therapy technique (independent variable), has an impact on freshmen undecided students choosing a major earlier (dependent variable) and making greater progress toward their degree (dependent variable) than students without coaching.

RQ1: Does pre-major coaching shorten the time to declaration for undecided students?

RQ2: Does pre-major coaching increase undeclared students' progress to graduation compared to those without pre-major coaching?

RQ3: Is there a significant difference in the number of times students change majors between students who utilize pre-major coaching and those who do not?

Methods

The research utilized a quantitative descriptive design, using both descriptive and inferential statistics, to compare students who received pre-major coaching with those who did not. Archival data in the form of college records from the database was utilized because they most accurately quantify the dependent variables, which are the time to declaration of a major, the number of major changes, and progress toward graduation. These variables measured persistence and retention. The participants already belonged to one of the two independent variable categories, pre-major coaching (i.e., those who received pre-major coaching and those who did not received pre-major coaching). The university's institutional research department provided an anonymous data set containing general and limited student demographic information. The goal was to find evidence that an effect or relationship between variables exists in a population. To determine the effect of coaching on student retention variables, a quantitative design was chosen as the optimal approach, using inferential statistics to test hypotheses and descriptive statistics to describe the population and understand the influence of other variables, such as demographic covariates, on the dependent variables.

Sample size was $n=2421$, which is approximately 100% of the population comprised of the number of students who were undecided between 2018-2023.

Figure 1. Hindrances to Choosing a Major

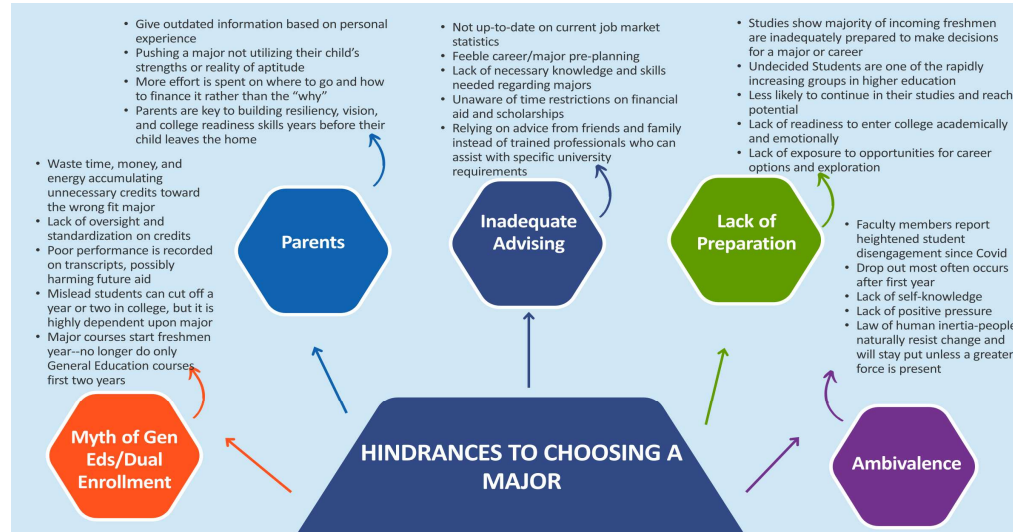


Figure 2. Pre-Major Coaching Intervention Technique

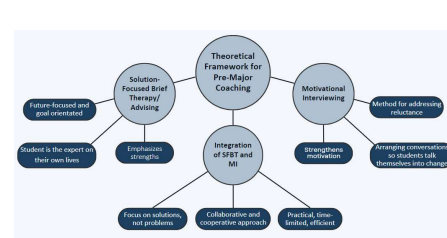


Figure 4. Persistence—Enrolled, Graduated, Drop Out

Enrollment Period	Number of UNDEs	Still Enrolled Today		Graduated		Dropped Out Without Graduating		Dropped Out/No Pre-Major Coachin	
	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Fall 2018	298	4	1	168	56	126	42	126	100
Fall 2019	215	14	7	117	54	84	39	84	100
Sum 2021	827	497	60	31	4	299	36	221	74
Sum 2022	607	345	57	5	1	148	24	109	74
Sum 2023	361	323	89	0	0	38	11	22	58

*All data generated from the author's study

Figure 3. Undeclared to Declared in Coached Semesters

Undeclared Semester	Total Undeclared Students		Declared From Email Nudge Prior To Matriculation		Received Pre-Major Coaching		Declared From Pre-Major Coaching		Total Declared From Advising (Email Nudge or Coaching)		Not Coached	
	n	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Summer 2021	827	553	69	201	24	100	50	653	79	73	9	
Fall 2021	169			157	93			127	80	12	7	
Spring 2022	42			18	43			18	100	24	57	
Summer 2022	607	357	59	194	32	90	46	447	74	56	9	
Fall 2022	153			144	94			109	76	9	6	
Spring 2023	44			17	39			17	100	27	61	
Summer 2023	361	194	54	129	36	68	53	262	73	38	11	
Fall 2023	97			88	91			84	95	9	9	
Spring 2024	13			13	100			13	100	0	0	

COLLEGE ON PURPOSE

Figure 5. Benefits of Starting College With Purpose

Increases Engagement	Fosters Vision	Grows Grit	Saves Time and Money
Boosts commitment level academically, emotionally, and socially	Gives a sense of purpose	Learned behavior and predicts performance	Reject misconceptions that a student will "figure it out" once they get there
Supports a sense of belonging and self-efficacy	Creates sense of calling which is linked to a sizeable predictor of life meaning	Sense of control over environment	Seek Professional Advising prior to matriculation to assess strengths and interests
Enhances overall well-being	Aids in persistence contributing to personal growth and development	Increases resiliency to road blocks	Proactive exploring mindset leads to right fit major and timely graduation

Results and Conclusion

H1a: The results of the hypothesis testing showed that the effects of coaching were overshadowed by the intervention of the email nudge. A majority of students in all three cohorts ($n = 553$ [69%] for 21; $n = 357$ [59%] for 22; and $n = 194$ [54%] for 23) declared before they ever arrived on campus due to a positive response to an email nudge urging them to declare before they start college. Thus, a large percentage of students responded to the email nudge by declaring early and were not coached, which minimized the effects of coaching on immediate time to declaration. However, out of those coached in the summer, 50 % declared immediately, 80% by fall, 99% by spring.

H2a: The results of t tests showed that students in the Summer 21 cohort who were coached ($M = 25.15$; $SD = 18.92$) had fewer credits left to graduation than those who were not ($M = 28.56$; $SD = 20.46$), $p = .048$. Students in the Summer 23 cohort who were coached ($M = 76.86$; $SD = 25.74$) had significantly fewer credits to complete their degree also compared to those who were not ($M = 81.94$; $SD = 22.79$), $p = .034$. Results for Summer 22 cohort were insignificant.

H3a: Results of a hierarchical regression showed that students who were coached made significantly fewer changes in majors after declaration than students who were not coached ($B = -.193$, $p = .036$). Coaching was a significant predictor over and beyond any of the covariates in the study.

Conclusion

Pre-major coaching using SFBT and MI, is a remedy for strengthening decision-making for undeclared students who are at risk for dropping out or floundering without such support. Moreover, pre-major coaching impacted retention significantly, made greater progress on degree completion, and had fewer changes in majors than students who were not coached. Pre-major coaching should be implemented as an intervention for all students who are undeclared in the summer prior to matriculation.

Future Work

- To positively retain the student and impact time to graduation, mitigation strategies for undecided students should focus on early support.
- Employ the Clifton Strengths Finder for incoming undecided students as an effective assessment tool to connect students with their strengths and right-fit major.
- Equip parents with the myth of excessive Gen Eds and instead help their child focus on classes that would contribute to finding the right fit major before matriculation.
- Change the label from "Undecided" to "Exploring Student."
- Open the Purpose Center as a branch of CASAS where current advising and academic success services reside. The Purpose Center would exist to:
 - Strengthen undecided students' decision-making and purpose in discovering the right-fit major to foster a timely graduation.
 - Assist current students in need of changing majors but need direction.
 - Allow declared students to double verify if they are in the right major.

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